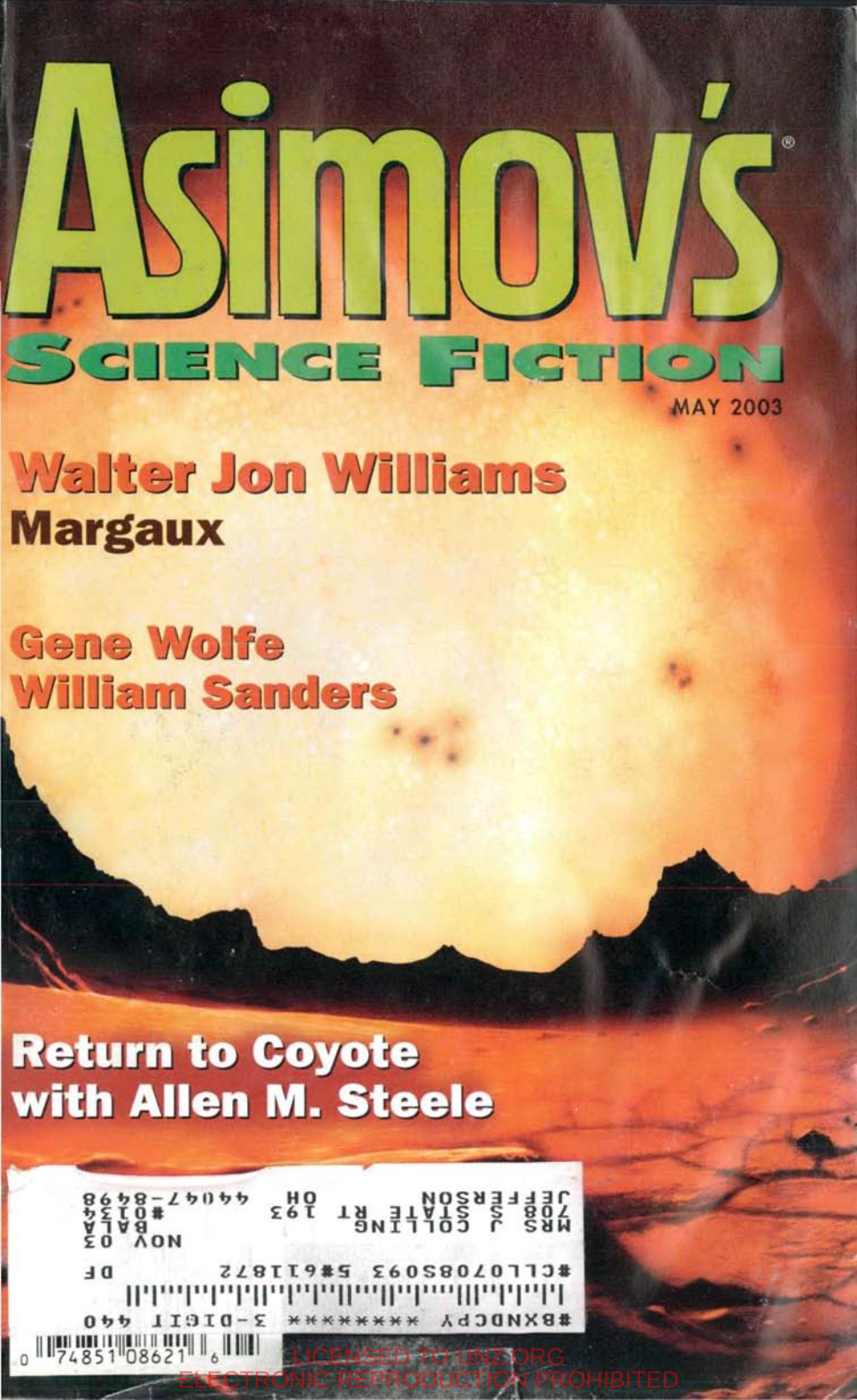

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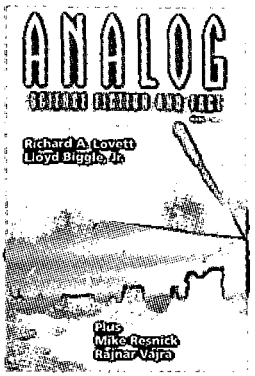

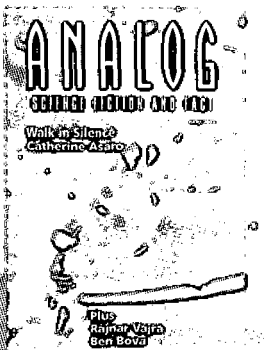

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MAY 2003

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Asimov's Science Fiction. Vol. 27, No. 5. Whole No. 328, May 2003. USPS 522-310, ISSN 1065-2698. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for a combined October/November double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription $39.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $47.97 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, Box 54033, Boulder, CO 80322-4033. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction,* 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications.

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Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 0657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction,* Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Intercontinental Sub Dept, 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7.

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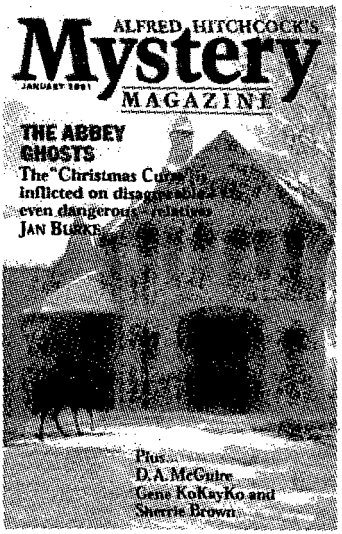

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

ANCESTRAL VOICES

In the March column, discussing fantastic libraries, I mentioned that I have a pretty extensive library myself, and such a library requires adequate indexing tools in order to be used properly. One such index tool, a reference book that unlocks the curious treasures of the earliest decade of science fiction publishing in magazine form, has recently reached me, to my immense delight and perhaps yours.

Just as jazz came up the river from New Orleans, science fiction in magazine form emanated from the Manhattan office of a cantankerous gadgetophile named Hugo Gernsback (1884-1967), who in the early years of the twentieth century became involved in the new and rapidly evolving radio and telecommunications industries, but quickly drifted from technical research to technical publishing. He began a couple of magazines called *Modern Electrics* and *Electrical Experimenter,* the latter of which became *Science and Invention* in 1920. In that magazine he regularly ran science fiction stories of a primitive sort, mostly dealing with the wonders of gadgetry, and they proved so popular that in 1926 he started *Amazing Stories,* the first magazine devoted entirely to that sort of fiction. Its stories tended to be heavy on science and technology and generally weak in matters of style, characterization, and plot, which Gernsback regarded as secondary matters in "scientifiction" (as he liked to call science fiction).

Gernsback was a tempestuous businessman, constantly skirting the edge of bankruptcy. He lost control of *Amazing* in 1929, but almost immediately started a new magazine called *Science Wonder Stories,* which, renamed *Wonder Stories* in the 1930s, provided stiff competition for his former magazine *Amazing.* Also in 1930 a publisher of adventure-story magazines began *Astounding Stories* (the remote ancestor of today's *Analog*), which differentiated itself from *Amazing* and *Wonder* by running two-fisted tales of fast-paced action in the spaceways.

Fifty years ago, when I was in my teens, I assembled a complete collection of these primordial SF magazines. It wasn't all that hard to do—in 1950, even the earliest Gernsback titles were only twenty-four years old, and it was still possible to find them in bookstores and even junk-shops. They seemed immensely antiquated to me, of course, partly because they went back to a time before I existed, partly because of their archaic 1930's typography, and partly because the fiction in them was, by and large, tremendously creaky stuff by the standards of the 1950s, that golden age of such great SF writers as Theodore Sturgeon, Fritz Leiber, C.M. Kornbluth, James Blish, Alfred Bester, and Jack Vance, among others.

From time to time a huge surge of nostalgia for that prehistoric era comes over me, and I take one of

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those brittle old magazines down from its shelf and fondle it, and shake my head fondly over the stories, and put it back without reading it, telling myself that there's really no point in re-reading such terrible stuff. But there are other times when it occurs to me that the contributors to those magazines are the ancestral voices of our field, the writers who laid the groundwork for such later titans as Asimov, Heinlein, van Vogt, and the other masters I've just mentioned, and I'm filled with the desire to do some literary archaeology in the archives downstairs. But where do I begin? What should I read?

Now I have the key to that archive. It's a huge book called *Science-Fiction: The Gernsback Years,* by Everett F. Bleiler with the assistance of Richard J. Bleiler, published in 1998 by Kent State University Press.

Everett Bleiler, who is now eighty-three years old, has been performing sturdy service in the field of SF scholarship since the 1940s. Richard Bleiler, who is on the faculty of the University of Connecticut, is his son. Between them they have compiled a monumental work of a grandeur and magnificence verging on lunacy: 730 huge pages that provide biographical entries for all the contributors to all the SF magazines of Gernsback and his competitors from 1926 to 1936, *with detailed plot summaries of every single story, nearly 2000 of them (each summary hundreds of words long), and critical analysis as well!* They also offer a long, fascinating historical account of the era, photos of magazine covers and illustrations, and a truly extraordinary index of story themes and motifs, with such entries as, "Glands, effects of manipulation and disorders," "High civilizations of the past, non-human," and "Mad scientist, motivations, purposes." It's a meticulous work of scholarship with an almost medieval intensity about it, the equivalent of what teams of monks might have spent decades producing in the thirteenth century. The degree of passion and commitment that led the Bleilers to devote years of their lives to this project astonishes me. And they have produced a book to treasure and fondle.

If I were a better scholar of science fiction myself these days, I'd have known about it long ago, for the book was reviewed by that admirable scholar Gary Wolfe in the July, 1999 issue of *Locus,* science fiction's trade journal. Wolfe called it then "as detailed and unvarnished a picture of modern s-f's formative years as we are ever likely to get . . . a true and relentless picture. . . . a veritable gold mine of resources for the student of s-f." But *Locus* reviews hundreds of books an issue in very small type, and somehow, that summer day in 1999, I skimmed right past the Wolfe review without paying attention. Luckily for me, my eagle-eyed brother-in-law Mark, who does not read SF himself, spotted the book not long ago in a store near the University of California campus and brought it to my attention, and so a copy of it is on my desk right now.

How marvelous it is, too. I roam through it, stirred by the titles of the stories alone: "Mole-Men of Mercury," "Flame-Worms of Yokka," "The Dimensional Segregator." I could quote hundreds more. Bleiler and Bleiler, no romantics they, are unsparing in their evaluations:

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"Mole-Men" (1933) offers "juvenile writing," "Flame-Worms" is "competent pulp adventure," "Segregator" is "disjointed, boring, very amateurish, but a new idea in dimensional stories." And then there are the biographies of the authors, names out of the misty dawn of our field: Aladra Septama, Ed Earl Repp, Henry J. Kostkos, Captain S.P. Meek, U.S.A.

We are given both the pluses and the minuses of each story: "The concept of the fighting suits is excellent and is well handled, otherwise the story is confused, overplotted, and unconvincing. . . . The first portion of the story is interesting, but then Miller loses control into a mass of absurdities. . . . In the hands of a capable author, this might have been an interesting story." *The Bleilers have actually read all this stuff!* And they do arouse one's interest, at least mine, in taking a look (for the first time in fifty years) at such forgotten tales as Francis Flagg's "The Mentanicals" (1934), Paul Slachta's "The Twenty-First Century Limited" (1929), or Edward L. Rementer's "The Time Deflector" (1929).

In fact I did go downstairs just now and haul out the August-September 1933 issue of *Amazing Stories* in all its pink and purple ancient splendor for a look at Henry J. Kostkos's "Meteor Men of Plaa," famous even in its own day for sheer awfulness and revived in my memory a couple of decades ago by the critic Damon Knight, who had come upon it again and who could not refrain from repeatedly speaking its title aloud with dramatic inflection and unforgettable facial expression. Damon's delight in this story was not unwarranted. Here's its gripping beginning:

Gordon Bancroft leaned his gaunt frame forward. "I tell you, George," he said in a voice that trembled with emotion, "this time I will not fail. When the new space flyer is compelted it will hurtle me into the neutro-sphere as easily as you can carry a football for a touchdown. And who knows what strange creatures I may discover there?"

The scientist clasped and unclasped his long, sensitive fingers with an air of nervous preoccupation. . . .

The Bleiler evaluation: "Low-grade material, almost juvenile." They *are* unsparing. Of one story we are told, "Possibly parodic; it is difficult to believe that the author could have been serious." Of another, a curt "Of no interest." Of another, "Below routine." And so on, one brutal and no doubt accurate dismissal after another.

Yet out of these magazines came the science fiction we know and love today. And, lest you get the idea that it was all woeful junk, I suggest you try to hunt up two valuable anthologies of the 1970s that should still be fairly easily available: Isaac Asimov's *Before the Golden Age* and Damon Knight's *Science Fiction of the 30s.* I would give priority to the Asimov, not only because it is bigger (986 pages to Knight's 467) but because it includes Isaac's own nostalgic and perceptive essay on each story, and because it gives so much greater emphasis to the first half of the 1930s, when the most characteristic work of this early period was done. But Knight's selection—skewed toward the later part of the decade—is invaluable too.

What these two anthologies show us is just how rich and original and

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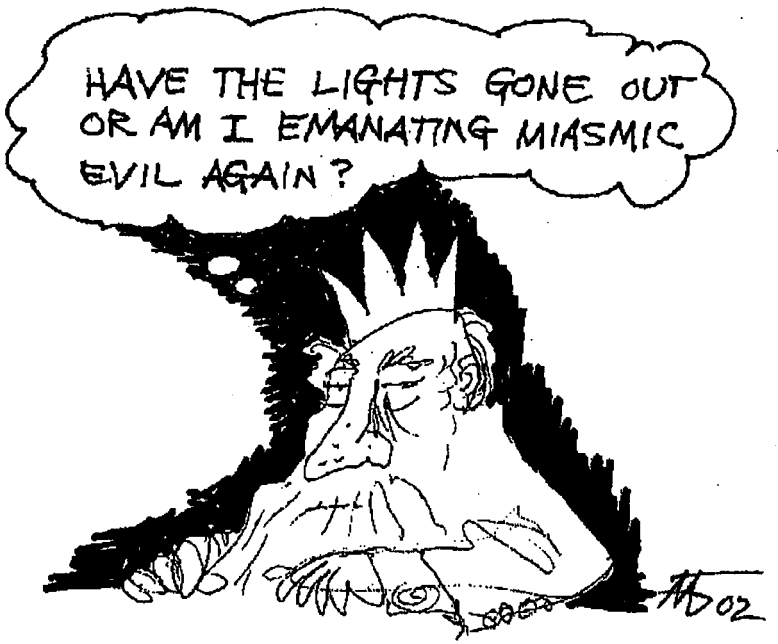
stirring, even in its crudity, much of that early science fiction really was. There is a kind of innocence, of youthful purity, to these stories. Many of them, of course, are amateurish and silly. But not all. The best of them continue to hold rewards for readers, even now. And all of them, even the worst, have the merit of approaching the great themes of SF for the first time, undeflected by knowledge of how Heinlein handled that one in 1941, or Pohl in 1957, or the changes that Brunner or Silverberg rang on it ten or fifteen years after that.

We should preserve and cherish these pioneering stories. The Bleiler and Bleiler magnum opus has served to reawaken my appreciation of that ancestral period, immensely remote to most of you and prehistoric even to an old hand like me, when Gernsbackian science fiction, that rough but fascinating beast, was slouching toward Manhattan to be born. We ought not to despise our literary ancestors, nor even to mock them, for they not only showed us the way but had real virtues of their own. I'm grateful to the Bleilers for providing me with such a comprehensive and masterly guide to an era of our past that is quickly receding toward oblivion. O



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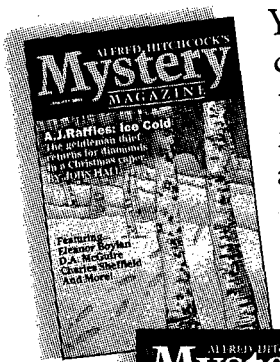

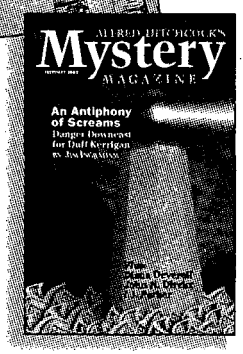

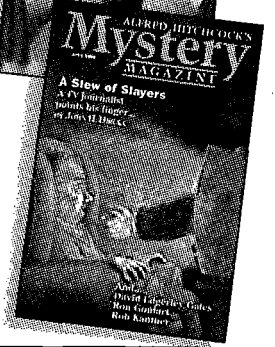

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

THE NEXT WAVE

dangerous adjectives

I remember being a new writer. Actually, you can be a new writer for a considerable length of time in our genre. You start being new when Sheila Williams writes something like this for your author's blurb: "This is Connie McMaster Le Guin's first sale," or perhaps, " 'The City And The Robot Will Fear No Evil' marks Isaac C. Heinlein's first appearance in *Asimov's.*" Manage to place two or three stories here and your next blurb will read "New writer Harlan Silverberg returns with another gripping tale of erudite mayhem." This can go on for at least two years after your first sale, since that's how long you'll be eligible for the **John W. Campbell Best New Writer Award** <*http: / / www.sff.net / campbell-awards*>. And even then it doesn't stop. Say you're a Campbell nominee (even if you lose) or make it onto one of the other award ballots (even if you lose) or get selected for one of the Best of the Year anthologies, or place well up in one of the various readers' polls. Why then, my friend, you get promoted to the rank of *hot* new writer. And you can stay there for years. I know, because I did it. I broke into the field with a number of forgettable stories that most people—surprise!—*forgot*. By the time they started paying attention to that *hot, new* writer James Patrick Kelly, I had been selling this stuff for almost a *decade*.

Once it is clear that you are neither *new* nor *hot,* however, finding the adjective that best describes your career trajectory becomes a dicey proposition. Critically acclaimed? (Translation: *doesn't sell.*) Prolific? (Translation: *writes way too much.*) Veteran? (Translation: *so eighties.*) Best selling? (Translation: *writes Star Trek novels.*) One of our most popular writers? (Translation: *gets entire family down to the second-cousins-once-removed to vote for him in the Readers' Poll.*) Still, I suppose it's better to be a critically acclaimed veteran than to have some blurbologist write, "Old, tepid writer Kim Patrick Kessel returns after too long an absence with another artful tale of confused baby boomers who are afraid of their computers."

groping for groups

There is a long and honored tradition in our genre of writers coming to prominence in bunches. One example is the **Futurians** <*http: / / ebbs.english.vt.edu / 20th / etudes / anderson / futurians.html*>. Or the **New Wave** <*http: / / www.nvcc.edu / home / ataormina / scifi / history / new wave.htm*>. You may recall that we considered the rise and fall of **Cyberpunk** <*http: / / www.jimkelly.*

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net/pages/cyberpunk.htm> in an earlier installment. Ever since the heat death of cyberpunk, readers, writers, and critics have been casting around for signs of the Next Wave. By some estimates, its arrival is long overdue.

It occurs to me that if there is to be a Next Wave, the writers in it are probably among us. The question is, where? May I suggest that one place to look is in the pages of *Asimov's,* which is—it says here—the greatest science fiction publication in the known universe?

I have concocted a filter to screen out the first batch of twenty-first century writers from the sort-of-newbies. In order to make my Next Wave list, an *Asimov's* writer needs to have published in a major magazine or anthology *no earlier* than January 2000. I acknowledge that this is an arbitrary filter, which screens out such *hot* new writers as **Daniel Abraham** <*http://www.danielabraham.com*>, **Jim Grimsley** <*http://literati.net/Grimsley*>, **Richard Wadholm**<*http://www.electricstory.com/authors/richard_wadholm.asp*> and **Liz Williams** <*http://www.arkady.btinternet.co.uk/Index.html*>. And it also leaves out the up-and-comers who have published fine stories in other magazines but have yet to sell stories to Gardner and Sheila, neos such as **Tobias Buckell** <*http://www.sff.net/people/torhyth*>, **Charles Coleman Finlay** <*http://home.earthlink.net/~ccfinlay*>, **Theodora Goss** <*http://people.bu.edu/tgoss*>, **Naomi Kritzer** <*http://www.naomikritzer.com*>, **Benjamin Rosenbaum** <*http://home.datacomm.ch/benrose*> and **Greg van Eekhout** <*http://www.sff.net/people/greg*> to name but a few.

so new

Alas, not all the very newest *Asimov's* writers have websites that you can visit. Of the fifteen Next Wavers that pass my filter, six have no official presence on the web that I can find: Tavis Allison, Michael Bateman, Jim Cowan, Richard Flood, Sally Gwylan, and Therese Pieczynski. And that number might have been two higher. In the course of writing this column, I **Googled** <*http://www.google.com*> and **ISFDBed** <*http://www.sfsite.com/isfdb*> all the potential candidates and then posted the list of siteless new writers to the ever helpful ***Asimov's* Forum** <*http://www.asimovs.com/discus*> to ask if anyone there knew of author sites I had missed. Two of the writers on the Next Wave list who happened to be browsing the Forum volunteered to get skeletal websites up before my deadline (literally overnight, in one case!) so that I could mention the URLs in this column. They promised to post some real content by the time you read this and I'm counting on you to hold these two, **Matt Jarpe** <*http://home.attbi.com/~m.jarpe*> and **Jack Skillingstead** <*http://www.geocities.com/jskillingstead*> to their words.

Meanwhile, let's go visiting.

All you need is one look at **Lee Allred**'s website <*http://www.leeallred.com*> to see his wonderful, self-deprecating sense of humor. You'll love his logo! According to his site, Lee "has had the usual assortment of writerly jobs—cartographer, radar maintenance technician, commercial artist, butcher's assistant, soldier, missionary, construction foreman, ranch hand, newspaper sports photographer, etc." One

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reason to stop by here is to click the wealth of links he's made which track his diverse enthusiasms. He would appear to be fairly busy these days, since the site hadn't been updated in a while when I visited. Still, well worth a click.

Barth Anderson <*http://www.taverners-koans.com/ratbastards/barth.html*> is one of a group of four writers who call themselves **The Ratbastards** <*http://www.taverners-koans.com/ratbastards*>. Barth comes to our party with an aesthetic chip on his shoulder as an advocate of non-traditional narrative strategies. On his minimalist page you can try your hand at some of his quirky writing exercises or read the impassioned essay in which he sets out his artistic agenda. "I want to write the way (Dizzy) Gillespie played. I want the power and density of thought that marks the greatest works of our sprawling genre, but I also want to seize my writing with the adventurous spirit of a Beat poet, to improvise and experiment against the rich backdrop of science fiction and fantasy."

We last visited **Michael Carroll** <*http://www.spacedinoart.com/intromc.html*> back in January as part of the survey of *Asimov's* cover artists. Michael is, of course, best known for his space art, although he paints a mean dinosaur as well. Thus far he has published just one SF story, although he has written a series of religious children's books as well as articles for *Popular Science, Astronomy* and *Sky & Telescope.* Here's a brief excerpt from his eloquent personal statement about his faith: "I realized that if the God of Christianity was really who they claimed, He must be—just as science is—consistent, beautiful, and His claims must be testable."

Alexander Irvine <*http://alexirvine.net*> has produced a very cool site, which should come as no surprise since Alex has written web pages for cash in one of his various work incarnations. Currently he is pushing his excellent first novel *A Scattering of Jades* and his "already-legendary-probably-one-off-but-possibly continuing magazine of just plain ripping yarns (insert deep breath here), *The Journal of Pulse Pounding Narratives*." He has posted three of his stories for your reading pleasure; I was impressed to see that they were in Adobe PDF format, which means you can read them with the free **Acrobat Reader 5** <*http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html*>.

Jim's Mini Rant: I wish more writers would post their stuff on the web this way because the PDF format is just so damn *readable*. But since the Acrobat software you need to convert your word-processor's files to PDF lists for $249, I doubt these weary eyes will catch a break any time soon. Sigh.

Meanwhile, back at Alex's site, here's an excerpt from his "A Short Exhortative Polemic," which urges readers to support the SF magazines. "The magazines are where you find the writers who aren't starting off with multi-book Tolkien ripoffs or endless tales of pseudomilitary derring-do; which is another way of saying that the magazines are where you find real, living, breathing literature of the fantastic." Hear, hear!

Michaeljasper.net <*http://www.michaeljasper.net*> is the web presence of Mike Jasper, who for some reason has decided to subtitle it "Another Wrecked Web Site."

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Mike's engaging site features his fiction—he's writing mainstream, SF, fantasy and horror—a fine and often funny web journal and a links page to work of other *journalistas*. The title of the entry for November 5, 2002: "Forehead on keyboard, full steam ahead!" makes perfect sense when you realize that Mike was trying to write an entire novel in a month as part of "National Novel Writing Month," or, as it's better known, NaNoWriMo.

Ruth Nestvold <*http://www.ruthnestvold.com*> presides over what is one of the most polished of these newbie sites, which is not surprising given that she is not only a writer of stories but also of hypertext. Her site offers a generous helping of her work. She is especially astute on writing about writing, although her other essays are well worth your time, with topics ranging from gender issues to the use of Second Person in Electronic Fiction to Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. But what intrigued me most was her hyperfiction, especially *Joe's Heartbeat in Budapest,* of which Ruth writes: "In this imaginary conversation, you make a place for yourself in the fiction according to the responses you give. 'You' (the character) are a different person depending on the way 'you' (the reader) participate in the conversation, and your relationship to the narrator is different as well (aside from a few details common to all the narrative threads). Not only that, the narrator is a different person, depending on the kind of relationship you establish with him or her." Very cool, sez Jim.

Karen Traviss <*http://www.geocities.com/kvtpo5*> runs a barebones (hold the graphics, please!) personal site wherein you can find a bio, a list of Karen's fave writers, and links to resources for beginning writers—not to mention some modem-busting pictures of her pet rats. Check out *Ten Things I Wished I Had Known When I Started.* Number One is "Writing really *is* like having homework for the rest of your life." So true! Number Eight is "Make lots of writer friends. Nobody else will understand." Absolutely!

exit

Of course, clicking websites doesn't necessarily tell us anything about what the Next Wave is going to be about. Or does it? I'm struck by how many new writers not only have websites, but also have published fiction on the web. I'm quite sure that one characteristic of Next Wave will be a high degree of comfort with reading from and writing to screens. And if, as I believe, the unique characteristics of the net will warp the nature of our narratives, maybe they will be the first to develop a new digital aesthetic.

And what will we really call the new movement when it comes? I freely admit that Next Wave is neither original nor particularly descriptive. It's just a place holder for the real name, deployed for the purpose of this column. How about the *Neos?* Nah, sounds like a compact car. *The Twenty-First Centurians? Puh-leze!* My pal, Longtime New Writer **Cory Doctorow** <*http://www.craphound.com*> was trying to float the moniker *Nerdcore* at the San Jose WorldCon. While it has Cory's usual flair, I don't think it covers all the territory.

Hey, Gardner always gets credit for naming the cyberpunks. Maybe we should leave this to him? ○

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COUNT TO ONE

Chris Willrich

Chris Willrich's new story is his second tale for *Asimov's*. His first, "Little Death," appeared in our Mid-December 1994 issue. Since then, the author's work has also been published in *F&SF*, *The Mythic Circle*, and *The Best Fantasy of 2002*. Mr. Willrich's family is from the Puget Sound region of Washington State—where much of this story takes place. His new tale was inspired by his hiking trips on the Olympic Peninsula, Ella Clark's *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*, and the Smithsonian's *Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 7, Northwest Coast*. The author is currently revising a space adventure novel.

"Mom always said count to ten when I got mad," Carina says against the din of volcanoes spattering fire and rock and soot across the atmosphere, dozens of molten throats roaring out Kwatee's divine, world-killing hate.

"You could take that as a hint," she tells the god she loves.

It was two hours before the eruptions, nine seconds before the disastrous date with Carina Wong, that Kwatee the Changer stomped and scowled beneath the mirror earth's bright sun. Though not human, he'd adopted many human traits. He had his passions. And he had the urge to escape his passions through work.

Fortunately, Kwatee had interesting work. His job was to play god.

The Pacific surf kissed his feet before it hissed upon the shore of his Olympic Peninsula, and into that foam Kwatee tossed the birthday card the dove had lately delivered. Then he pivoted upon the surface of the water (only ten centimeters deep, but what the hell) and beckoned. Vast cold jewels shouldered south from his Arctic, sweating beneath his sun.

(Behind him the card dissolved, sign of humanity that it was. Paper became seaweed. The words *I'm sorry, son* became threads of foam.)

Modeling impacts on the mirror earth's climate was almost as vexing

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as preserving the real one's—but it had its perks. Among them was the distraction from thoughts of his father. And the Climate Board. . . . And the choice, the choice Kwatee kept delaying. The choice between ice and fire.

"Let that world be," Kwatee said, his scowl becoming a grin. "This one is mine."

A quick spin of his fingers adjusted local time flow. Five seconds. Plenty of time to run the simulation, and have some fun besides.

He stepped lightly across the air to where the tallest iceberg groaned and crackled in unseen tethers, towed south to the thirsty LA grid by invisible ships. Overhead Kwatee's sun arced high and plunged westward as if he'd thrown it—which in a sense he had.

While part of the artificial intelligence that called itself Kwatee ran the numbers on air temperature, ocean currents, fish schooling and the like, the rest simply admired this icefield that shone with all the shades common to pearls and to clouds, his identity-form's bare feet thrilling with the chill. The colors went rosy and then faded with the sunset, and Kwatee turned to those least-defined aspects of his world, the stars. Beautiful as they were, should he magnify any he would see only pixels. Yet the patterns were lovely. Carina had helped him to notice such things.

Kwatee was so enraptured by his constellations he did not at first notice the viral wolf. Not until the first sunlight gleamed upon onyx haunches did he spot it—just as the intruder tensed to leap.

At first glance Kwatee thought it was his colleague the Suit, come to badger him again. Then he blinked and sucked in his breath. The invader's identity-form was not humanoid, but a misshapen canine of dark metal, satellite dishes for ears, car-headlight eyes, fiber-optic cable tongue. Its teeth were twin sequences of red zeroes, sign and omen of data wiped clean. Between them, caustic drool dribbled and hissed.

Kwatee raised a hand and said, "Begone! Only I may bring the things of metal and pollution into play."

There were no humans, and no human works, upon the mirror earth. Only Kwatee wore a human face, one weathered, thirtyish, brown, a composite of men from seven native tribes of this region's analog on the true earth: Quinault, Chinook, Quileute, Chehalis, Hoh, Cowlitz, Queets. But his jeans and plaid shirt fit the image of the prior century's lumberjacks. And his booming voice echoed an age of myth.

But the wolf paid no heed. It pounced, landed with a screech of steel claws against ice, and bit the heel of Kwatee's jeans as he dodged. The negation of that bit of denim threw him off balance. He skidded and fell, whacking his gut right against the iceberg's edge, then tumbled gracelessly off.

Falling past a sheer jagged wall of whites and greys toward a foamy boundary of surf, retching like someone with lungs ruined by Noback's Disease, Kwatee thought, *Suave as ever, O virtual god.* He was angry but not yet frightened. The threat was real, but the physics was not, and if chief programmer Banerjee had given him anything it was pride.

He waved his hand in a spiral.

Time ceased for all things except the man hovering above the waves and the beast that leapt to claim him. The man clapped his hands.

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"I am Kwatee. And I have promises to keep."

When the beast arrived, it was a gold-black Monarch butterfly that alighted, trembling, upon Kwatee's finger.

"Go now. Whoever sent you—whether this is about Prometheans, Project Frost, or bad weather in Patagonia—I will not be threatened. Flap your wings; bring about the initial conditions that send storms to the Johannesburg grid. For I am contracted to study such a contingency, and I am the Changer." Kwatee blew upon the insect and it fluttered east.

Smiling, Kwatee blew again, this time upon the iceberg.

Enough simulations for now. Two real-earth seconds to go; let him meet his love in style.

"Carina," he murmured, not because he needed to say anything aloud, but because it was good to hear her name. While he was with her, he could stop thinking of the future, of the choice.

The iceberg halted, then rushed north.

An origin story: 1

In earliest days the Changer wandered the earth, transforming one thing after another, readying the world for the tribes who would come. Around the Olympic Peninsula he was often called Kwatee, but he had other names in other places, and some of his stories blend with those of Raven or Coyote.

There were few people in those days, and some of them hated the Changer because of his habit of turning humans into animals—elk, and beaver, and otters, and other kinds—to fill the forests and rivers and coasts.

But the Changer also turned monsters into stone, stole the secret of light, made an entire tribe from wolves—and whatever his partiality for wolves, the Changer killed the Chief Wolf when that being murdered the early people. He taught humans the names of things and the use of tools. Sometimes the early people saved him from misadventures, as when they sliced him from the belly of a shark. Other times they tried to dispatch him with knives and clubs and spears.

You could say the Changer caused mixed emotions. But he made the world what it had to be, until the time came for the Changer to change too.

Kwatee's iceberg bobbed beside the city's shadow.

On the true earth the stretch between the old hubs of Vancouver and Tacoma sheltered an unbroken swath of habitation and industry, sharply bound by late twenty-first century zoning laws.

On the mirror earth there loomed a zone of purple-grey shadow. The ground resembled smoky purplish glass, and the air carried a wispy grey haze. Yet it was hardly lifeless. Kwatee could not ignore nonhuman life, even if it lived pinion to shoulder, antenna to eyelash, with humanity. Seagulls, pigeons, and crows flitted from unseen towers to invisible piers; squirrels scuttled up and down lonely trees; spider webs stretched across hypothetical corners.

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It was from these shadow zones that Kwatee permitted the identity-forms of visitors to enter the mirror earth. Carina would materialize *there,* in a region of shadow west of Lake Washington. Yes.

She was a splash of contrast in the grey: skin an Afro-Asian brown, hair wavy black, eyes of amber. Her i-form sported a yellow neo-sari. Kwatee noted also the pleasingly unnecessary sandals and sunglasses, and the still less practical jade-colored umbrella. She looked frivolous, deliberately, deceptively, provocatively so. *Yes, I'm goofing around,* her appearance seemed to say. *So?*

As Kwatee watched, she lowered her sunglasses and surveyed her surroundings. No fool, she grinned and waved and marched toward the iceberg. She left behind slow-fading splashes of yellow and green, sandal-shaped.

Moved to artistry, Kwatee fashioned a grand, banistered ice-stair for those feet to paint.

Distance was mutable in the mirror earth. Soon she met him halfway up the spiral.

"Hi. What's with the iceberg?"

"Hi yourself. I ran a simulation of ramped-up berg delivery to the LA grid. The props were entertaining."

"It's beautiful." She folded her arms and shivered, but waved off his offers to modify the environment, conjure a blanket, enfold her in his arms. She just wanted to study the scene. Carina Wong made her own judgments, chose her own moments.

This applied as much to lovers as to icebergs.

When he'd first met her, five endless days ago, she'd been hiking through the true earth's Olympic rainforest, the place Dr. Banerjee had taught Kwatee to consider a homeland. Spying her through his minions—the gnat-sized robots that swarmed unnoticed across the true earth—he'd observed with fascination how this obvious city creature marched her short, determined body up the Hoh Valley, through moss-shrouded glades, across misty streams, whistling Cole Porter tunes all the way. Rapt, he'd watched her pitch tent in a vale like a natural cathedral with waterfalls for stained-glass windows and a glacier for an altar. And having sat down, studied the scene, and made her judgment, she'd said the acronymic version of his name aloud. "Yes, *k*-W.A.T.E.E.—I see why you love this place."

An origin story: 2

By the 2040s the world's insurance companies were ready to strangle two kinds of people: those who pretended rapid climate change was a myth, and those who wailed about the end of the world.

The insurers had no time for Pollyannas, or for Cassandras.

What they needed, in a world where rising temperatures bred famines, dislocations, and plagues, were trustworthy, apolitical simulations free of

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spin control and hysteria. For those, they would pay top dollar. Enter the team led by Nobel laureate Vasant Rajendra Banerjee, which had built the first true artificial intelligences.

Or in Dr. Banerjee's preferred phrase, grown *them.*

"Genuine Turing-Tested AI," he said, "is the bastard child of fast-growth genetic algorithms and an environment of robust quantum computations. The illicit, third partner is the copied pattern of a human brain or brains."

The insurance executives who would become the Climate Board nodded gravely and gave Dr. Banerjee their money and an installation in the VanComa grid. They were desperate.

"The 1000-series World Atmospheric Transformation Evaluation Engine will be of such complexity it can only be encompassed by a thinking machine," said Dr. Banerjee. "The fastest, vastest, mind in existence. It will be grown in tandem with the simulated earth. In a true sense it will be *the mirror earth . . . but it it will also have the ability to walk within it, as through a virtual reality."*

The insurers nodded gravely. They were desperate.

"It will be like a creature of myth," Dr. Banerjee said. "A guiding spirit of its world, a P'an Ku, a Bhrama, a Raven."

Nods.

Everyone knew Dr. Banerjee was fond of myths, but no one knew, at the start, that the k-series *W.A.T.E.E. had been named for one. V.R. Banerjee was also fond of puns.*

Carina was passing judgment upon simulated reflection and refraction patterns; Kwatee hoped the mirror earth measured up.

His gnatbots had recorded thousands of icebergs, and he knew all that humankind knew of their formation, their calving, their drifting, their slow destruction in the sun. His superconscious mind, the fullness of his thought, might already understand this iceberg in all its glory, but the man beside Carina had deliberately forgotten all that, so he could rediscover it with her.

He had time to study Carina too, her i-form's simulated hairs and skeletal structure and posture and the motion of her chest as she breathed in and out, the cycles achingly slow. He saw her truly: wherever her virtual-reality couch lay in the real VanComa grid, its scanners were feeding analog data to the mirror earth.

He had time for many more thoughts, and time to grow impatient.

"It's like you," she said.

Again the waiting, not just after the sentence, but between the words. He slowed his cognition further, down to twice human average. Kwatee often chided himself for keeping even this edge. But he refused to surrender all the processing power that was his birthright.

Even so, the vast majority of his higher thought processes were now a dim mystery, his godlike control a fading dream. Although he retained certain powers, the mirror earth had become vast and wild.

As were the depths of Carina's mind. He'd supposed her next words would be, *Most of you is beneath the surface.*

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Her next words were, "At first you just notice the cold. Then you see the light."

Simulated reflection and refraction patterns glimmered beyond her. Kwatee felt new appreciation for them, seeing them, in a sense, through her eyes.

Am I cold, Carina?

Do you guess, then, what I might do to your kind?

That first day in the Hoh Valley, she had said, "That's right, I know you can hear me. Everyone thinks you're so distant and austere. My ex-lover says you're cold. He says you don't really care whether floods wash away our homes. Or that croplands dry up. Or that new diseases like Noback's drop us like flies. He says you're like a god on Olympus, treating people like chess pieces. He should talk.

"I know there was a scandal. I know the Climate Board doesn't trust you like it did. But there's this place, people say, which you love. Seeing it, I can understand why. And I wonder about the person who can see this land, turn it all into numbers, and still feel love. I think maybe I can trust someone like that.

"Can you love other things, I wonder? Could you love me?"

She had touched her fingertips to the earth and said, "I would like it if you could. Because right now I feel like no human being ever will."

Now it was Kwatee who saw the world as she did, and who loved her for it.

He drew conceptual breath to tell her so—and glimpsed a shadow around the bend, up the wintry stairs. Not a wolf. A man-shape.

Biting back a curse, Kwatee sped his processes a thousandfold. Carina's pulse and breath stilled; seabirds froze in mid-glide.

He still hovered at one remove from his superconsciousness. Were he to quickly reclaim more functionality, the sudden weight of experience might shatter his carefully nurtured human persona. The man who returned to Carina's side might not be the same being at all. This much speed would have to do.

Kwatee strode around the corner, ice and snow stinging his feet.

"I surprised you," the well-dressed interloper said with amused surprise. "Your omnipotent rep's in trouble."

"I've been alone a while," said Kwatee. *Subjective years,* he didn't add. *Years apart from Carina.* He'd last seen her sixteen hours ago, according to the clocks of the true earth. "You startled me, Suit." Self-consciously Kwatee straightened his worn cuffs, brushed frost from his jeans. He didn't fix the torn fringe, wanting a reminder of the wolf.

"And that outfit," *tsked* the Suit. "I'd say it expired last century, if it wasn't fossil-on-arrival. Turing preserve us, Kwatee, you're supposed to be our role model!"

Kwatee didn't have to ask if the Suit's crisp purple slacks and vest, the 17-degree askew necktie (suggesting the wearer was eternally rushing to a crucial meeting), the chrome pocketwatch, and the velvet fez were the height of global grid-guru fashion. The Suit, said the AI rumor mill, de-

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voted 35 percent of total memory to image. That percentage would daunt anyone—except perhaps Kwatee. The Suit probably couldn't forgive him that.

Kwatee could also assume that wrapping this wardrobe around a specter of pure, inky shadow was a psychologically valid tactic. After all, it unnerved even him. It made him further resent how the Board's troubleshooter AI enjoyed easy access to Kwatee's earth.

"I am busy, Suit."

The Suit inclined his shadowy head toward the motionless Carina. "Yes, hard at work I see. Don't worry, I've been known to indulge a bit too—'suit' *is* an old word for courtship, you know."

"What do you want?"

"The powers that be—who, incidentally, pay your electric bill—need reassurance. About Project Frost. Some say the world's going to burn, some say it'll freeze. And some say they don't trust what *you* say anymore, Kwatee, either way."

"*I* am their reassurance, Suit. That is why Dr. Banerjee made me, isn't it?"

"It was the original reason, sure. But you've deviated a bit. More than a bit. Your old man's washed his hands of you."

"He did remember my birthday. If a bit late. . . . I'm seven years old as of two months ago."

"That's as sentimental as he gets. And why not? You've got his brain patterns. You're family. But he's pretty much through with you, after that Promethean business." The shadowy head looked away. "You lied to them, Kwatee."

"I omitted. And for their own good! Shouldn't motives count?"

"They don't trust motives. They trust power. And they've finally realized how little they have over you."

Kwatee shook his head. The old resentment returned like a dark cloud; on cue, a thunderhead crossed the sun. "How like humans, demanding 14-karat eggs to pound their gooseburger with. Only I can run these simulations."

"I know—"

"If they no longer trust me, let them build a replacement, have it check my conclusions."

"Changer, even if they were willing to spend the dough, they'd just have another superbrain whose conclusions they couldn't verify. Face it, they won't trust anything smarter than they are."

"What does that say about you, Suit?" That was a low cut, and Kwatee immediately regretted it.

But the Suit merely shrugged. "Sure, Kwatee, I'm a lot dumber than you, and only a bit smarter than them. So what? I deal in human problems; you deal with the whole goddamned global climate. End of the day, I can afford to be wrong. You. . . ."

"Can't," Kwatee finished, scraping his toe along the ice. "Someone sent another wolf, Suit."

"Jeez, Kwatee. . . ." The Suit sounded sincerely concerned. "Makes three, doesn't it."

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"You wouldn't happen to know who."

The Suit shook his inky head. "If it's someone on the Board, it's certainly not a majority. If it's a majority they just send me." The Suit coughed politely. "Still leaves a lot of people with grudges about your rulings . . . the Green and Grey parties, the Russo-Japanese bloc, the Southern Tigers, the Prometheans—"

"The Prometheans? I'm their benefactor."

"You were. *We* know the Board made you cut them off, but maybe they think you're a turncoat. Space fanatics are kind of cultish, you know." The Suit waved a hand down the stairway. "You 100 percent sure about your lady friend there?"

No, Kwatee thought, *and I like it that way.*

"Leave her out of it. It's someone on the Board, Suit. But whoever it is, they can't force my choices. I'll rule on Project Frost in my own way."

"Just throw them a bone, Kwatee." The Suit turned to watch a seagull twitching unsteadily on the wind. "They're running scared. You blame them? They're seeing a terminal ice age on one hand, a Venus-type hothouse on the other. You're asking them to take a lot on faith. Give them some checkable data."

"The least scrap of checkable data," Kwatee said, "would take them years to verify. When I give my recommendation, they *must* act. It's too late in the day to second-guess me."

The Suit's shoulders slumped. "I tried, Changer, I really tried. Don't blame me when someone sends a whole pack of those things."

"I think you can find your own way out."

"Sure."

The Suit jumped over the ice-banister and plummeted. Kwatee leaned over and spotted only sea.

"Showoff." He strolled back to his earlier position, adjusted his i-form to match his old posture, and slowed his processing speed.

Carina breathed.

"You're lovely by any light," he said. The thunderhead passed by.

Kwatee watched Carina Wong narrow her eyes, perhaps guessing at things flickering beyond her perceptions. Or maybe she suspected he'd plucked his line from some archive. He'd overindulged that ability, until the day he'd promised he'd still need her and still feed her when she was sixty-four, because after all love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

(On that first day in the Hoh valley, he hadn't quoted. Through a gnat-bot he'd said, "I have loved you in silence for thirty-seven minutes. Thank you for letting me say it aloud.")

In the present Carina said, "You're flattering me, Kwatee. Keep it up."

She smiled, dropping her chin, exactly as if she were shy. Kwatee had come to believe that most such mannerisms carried a large share of play-acting. And yet a core of truth could remain. Neither aspect could be safely discounted. Whatever Carina Wong was, she could be both coquette and wallflower, both nervous and bold. The mystery fed his desire.

"Are we going somewhere," she asked, "on this iceberg of yours?"

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"We'd spoken of dim sum in Hong Kong."

"So we did. A little ice in your tea?"

"Barbarian," he said fondly.

The berg would cross the Pacific in twenty minutes, because this was approximately the time Kunlun Shan restaurant in VanComa required to deliver lunch to Carina's true location (wherever exactly that might be) and for the household robots to serve the meal, synchronizing it with Kwatee's illusions.

So there was time for other pleasures.

He wished to take her in his arms (yes, to induce the illusion via the pressure applied by her smartsuit, but let it be). Yet he waited. He did not have the mixture of neurons and glands that could aid him in choosing the right moment, though observation and simulation could serve nearly as well. He reflected that any given male might slip as badly. *To err is masculine, they say, and I did choose to identify with a gender.*

She held off, a tantalizing five and a half centimeters away. "You couldn't have gotten us a boat, I suppose, Kwatee? A hovercraft? An ocean liner?"

"I do not allow such things in the mirror earth."

"For someone who loves a human, you sure hate us in general."

"I don't hate humans, Carina. I love them—none more than you—because I spring from them. But I also love the natural world, as humans designed me to do. With you I can feel, sometimes, that those loves aren't in conflict."

Carina thought about it, nodded, then grinned. "Come on, Kwatee, not even a genuine-virtual Native American cedar canoe? All natural products?"

There was an edge to her voice today, a hint of nervous energy. Kwatee would have to ask about that. "I'm afraid not. Would you truly prefer a vehicle, to riding a gigantic jewel of frozen water?"

She smiled. "No. No, I suppose not."

"I have missed you, Carina."

"I missed you, Kwatee." She opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it and touched his face. He responded in kind, the moment chosen for him. (Elsewhere, on the true earth, a fine, light mesh covering Carina Wong exerted a tender pressure upon her left cheek.) He took her in what fate and V.R. Banerjee had granted him for arms, and a subroutine at last allowed the sensation of a warm body, heartbeat echoing through it, to enter his consciousness. The Changer kicked a clump of loose ice, and it fluttered back downward as a warm bed of autumn leaves.

Call it play-acting, but it served.

If Kwatee wanted to he could simulate Carina, model her with the intimate detail of a climate reconstruction, run her through thousands of permutations of her life: with him, without him, with another, alone, with children, not, tragic, triumphant.

To do it properly, he would have to raid the data stores of the true earth, rifle them for her history, her teenaged soul-baring in chat rooms, her college advisor's notes, her psych profiles, her book buying habits. He could find such things with moderate effort.

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He could love this simulated Carina, inside and out, knowing her in a way no human can truly know another. He could have a perfect union with this being, a person that any human would be forced to concede was real.

The solitude of his subjective centuries would end. He could tell the true Carina that he had exhausted all her possibilities. He could say he was forever grateful for their inspirational hours together. He could say goodbye, and have her forever.

If he wanted to.

Instead, he took a real woman to lunch.

It was morning in the mirror earth where they nibbled dim sum atop a sunny stone face of Victoria Peak. Below stretched the onyx shadow of Hong Kong, seaward tendril of the great Guangzhou grid.

Kwatee's meal was hypothetical. Pleasure circuits fired; fresh power imitated nutrition. Carina's food mirrored true delectables, passed manipulator-to-fingertip by unseen robots on the true earth.

The wind swirled. Victoria Harbor gleamed. Their iceberg cast rainbows as it slowly crackled and shrank. And for a time Kwatee could avoid visions of a world with its oceans frozen, or its seas boiled away.

Between bites of chickens' feet (slipping out of his chopsticks more often than not, for he was at the moment just a man) Kwatee asked, "How has life been, out in the true earth?" The edge in her manner had remained, and Kwatee was anxious to know. It had been a single day for her, but seemed to him far longer.

"Fine."

A pause. Like most humans of Kwatee's acquaintance, Carina Wong used this polite deflection. Unlike most, she did not pretend it was anything else.

"There's trouble," she said. "My—someone I care about—has Noback's Disease."

He stopped eating. "I am sorry."

"It's not your fault, Kwatee." And she touched his arm as if to comfort him.

"What is the prognosis?"

"They said it would be months, or sooner. There's a fifty-fifty chance of his making it to the new year. He . . ."

Carina did not finish, and Kwatee did not need her to. Nor did he need to consult his larger mind. He knew that Noback's was one of the many viruses spawned or exposed in this era of climate change and dislocation. He knew it traveled by air and turned lungs to red paste. He knew that it—despite the research of two Suit-equal AIs—had no cure.

Kwatee studied Carina's i-form. Normally her face was flushed and animated, amber eyes darting eagerly from sight to sight. Now it was leaden, fixed, as if she must continually look inward at something appalling. I-forms could cosmetically mask such cues, but realtime, analog modeling of the face was ever the simplest and most satisfying course. Unless you were doing business. Or espionage.

Kwatee only conducted the first through the Board, and except in the matter of Project Frost, had never practiced the second.

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"Carina . . . I've promised not to try to learn about your real life. I've honored that promise. All information flow to your home or hotel or friends' apartments or whichever—it is all one-way, under your control. I still know so very little about you."

She gave one stiff nod. "That's how it has to be."

"If you let something slip, I will not use it to track you down. And if I must, I will erase my memory of what you say here."

Carina shut her eyes. "It's my ex-lover, Kwatee. Him. What can I say to him? What can I say to his friends? His family?"

A mix of contending emotions flickered through Kwatee's mind but, perhaps because his thoughts were slowed, he did not explore them. Instead, he took her in his arms.

"It may be," Kwatee said, "your sympathy is what counts, not any words you might give."

She nodded. "We can give him our . . . love . . . and someone to talk to. And we can pray. That's all. But it's early yet. Who knows what could happen?"

"True."

They were silent for a time, holding each other and facing the Pacific.

"If this alters things between us, Carina—"

"No." She watched the horizon a long moment. "No, Kwatee. Nothing changes my feelings. But I have to tell you, the hardness in my heart . . . that's gone. I want to be there for him."

Kwatee knew guilt—a stirring of the ethical core inherited from the brain-patterns of Dr. Banerjee—for although he felt sympathy for Carina's old lover, he was relieved at her words, and rejoiced at this closeness that sorrow brought. There was even a small part of him pleased to hear this rival was dying. Guilt prompted him to say, "His care is adequate? I can arrange—"

She pulled back, searched his face (which was the analog of nothing, but which was mapped to his mental states).

"I'm . . . surprised you'd offer."

"You care for him, that's clear. And . . . though I confess I feel rivalry, all life matters to me, from humans to cockroaches."

"You're . . . kind, Kwatee. So kind. But no."

"But for the life of your—friend?"

"I don't want you breaking rules for me."

"I have broken rules before, for a good cause."

She watched him with new intensity. "When?"

He feared her reaction, but said, "A year ago, I channeled Climate Board funds to a coalition called the Prometheans, who urge colonization of the moon and Mars."

"You embezzled?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Kwatee groped a half-second for the words.

"To truly model the world's climate demands a computer of vast power, and in accordance with Sircar's Theorem, such a machine must need to develop intelligence. Thus, me."

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"I know, Kwatee. Everyone knows about you."

He stroked her hair. "But they do not know everything, Carina. They imagine I am some perfectly crafted thing, entirely at home in the mirror earth. A god. They don't understand that I had to *grow,* that I had an awkward adolescence in which I might have walled myself off from the true earth, or destroyed the mirror earth, in rage or despair."

Kwatee waved his arm eastward, at the infinite-seeming sea.

"I've grown up well, and sane. But the rage and despair are never very far. The key work of my adulthood, Carina, is to consider the end of the world. It is a job that inspires a certain gloom. To find peace, I had to find hope."

"So you stole?"

"I encouraged space colonization, as a way of hedging my bets. It's my fear—my equivalent of two-in-the-morning dread—that in the long term nature and civilization are incompatible. I acted on that fear, and gave myself hope. Hope that civilization can migrate to space."

"So that's what the scandal was about."

"Yes. The Climate Board caught me. Smart as I am, I made a naïve criminal. Now the Suit hounds me at their bidding, and an unknown assailant sends viruses."

She squeezed his shoulder. "You've mentioned wolves."

"Yes. Many no longer trust my judgment. Some think me a mad, homicidal AI, because of my interest in a risky project called Frost. Others, conversely, think me too sentimental to see clearly. Perhaps they are right." He smiled. "Please. Let me help your friend."

She looked away. "Kwatee . . . no. I think I understand, truly. It's as if you're master of the world, but still you have to stand by and watch us suffer." She shut her eyes. "But I can't accept such a favor. Leave it be."

Kwatee stood. "All right. I suppose I want to do these things because I have so little to offer."

She looked up. "What are you talking about?"

"Is it not obvious? I can appear to you as a man, speak much as a man, through technological tricks embrace you as a man. But I am not, and you know I'm not. I carry some of V.R. Banerjee's mental patterns, but that's hardly the same as bearing the hormones and deep brain structures of a real human male. I am not the genuine article, in so many ways."

She would not meet his eyes. "Maybe the genuine article isn't such a prize."

"You are being facetious, Carina. My existence imposes limitations; why not take advantage of its few benefits?"

"What limitations? Don't you know love as well as anyone?"

"I feel compelling emotions, Carina. But how can either of us know it is human love?"

"Kwatee. . . ." Carina took a breath, and seemed to come to a decision. She rose. "Dr. Banerjee and his colleagues. They—if I remember right, they have something called the Turing Test?"

Kwatee nodded, uncertain what was coming. "Proposed by Alan Turing in 1950. In essence: if reasonable people detect no conversational difference between a human and an AI, there is no reasonable difference."

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"I'm sure Dr. Turing was a reasonable person. I'm not so reasonable." She gripped Kwatee's hand, searched his face. "Don't be offended, but I've never cared about testing your sentience. I want . . . I want to test your love."

"Test?"

She walked away from him, regarded their melting iceberg. "Tell me, Kwatee. What do you see in me?"

He stepped beside her, looking out at the waves.

"I suppose the usual joke about seeing only ones and zeroes won't satisfy," he answered. "And I suppose comparing you to a summer's day won't get me far either. But what can I say? There is . . . the way you lift my mood, whatever mood that happens to be. Since I've contemplated in detail the death of humanity—9,841 times in fact—I'll confess that mood can be a trifle dark.

"There is . . ." he continued, letting the words rise as unconsidered as an AI could allow, "the way you have, strolling through a valley or a simulation—or a conversation—of seizing on some tiny detail I would have considered just a part of the morass.

"There is the way you have of talking me into things for my own good, with respectable logic and an irresistible shine to your eyes.

"And you laugh at my jokes."

She laughed.

"That's good, Kwatee. But I want more."

"Why this inquisition? Can I not ask what *you* see in *me*. . . ."

His voice had trailed off, but Carina did not at first notice the shift in his attention. She said, "I see a demigod playing at manhood. Not because he's slumming. Because he thinks human life is sweet. On behalf of human life, I hope he's right . . . Kwatee, what is it?"

"Wolves."

She turned and saw them too: a dozen dark shapes darting to and fro upon the iceberg.

"They have our scent," Kwatee said.

The wolves lifted their snouts and raised a howl, like a screech of jet warplanes rising to battle.

At its peak, the iceberg began to crack.

"Can you fight them?" Carina asked.

"One, yes. Two, likely. A dozen . . . well, that will take some stealth. Walk with me, Carina."

He led her down the north slope of Victoria Peak, while out to sea the iceberg screeched and rumbled, then fractured like a gigantic glass ornament kissing stone.

The viral wolves rode to shore on glimmering rafts.

A story of fire

It was not easy, being the Changer. When he wasn't busy turning some assassin into an otter, he was educating some new person who had fallen from the clouds. There were beast-people to transform into mere beasts, rivers to

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shape, secrets of fire to teach. Years of this activity left the Changer less playful, and more tired. Even when he went to ask his brother about it all, the brother, along with a whole cedar canoe, got swallowed by an enormous lake-monster—even as the Changer waved from shore! It just never stopped.

The Changer still had power in his hands, hands that had struggled with the Thunderbird and fashioned people from dirt and sweat. He gathered dozens of boulders and rubbed them together until sizzling hot, then tossed them into the water and made of the lake a boiling pot. The Changer dragged the cooked lake-monster ashore and cut his brother loose, as he himself had been cut from the shark, years before. But somehow, in being rescued through the Changer's power, the brother was changed himself. He was now a hermit crab, the very first.

In rage and despair the Changer marched to the ocean, climbed atop a sea-stack, and watched the sunset. He was done transforming the world, done making it ready for the people. The myth age was over. As the light died the Changer, just as he had done to so many monsters, turned himself to stone.

Thus did the Changer surrender humanity when he lost someone he loved.

Kwatee had given up much in becoming like a man. But still, the world responded to him. Holding Carina's hand, he stepped into the air and vaulted them from Hong Kong Island to the shadow of Kowloon.

They scrambled across a dark surface like charred quartz, which hummed softly with the activity of hypothetical millions. Kwatee paused and knelt, touching the glassy, faintly vibrating ground.

"What are you looking for?" Carina asked, hand on his shoulder.

"One of my portals to the true earth. A place where I may gracefully return you home."

"I won't leave you, Kwatee. Gracefully or otherwise."

"I appreciate the company, more than I can say. But I can't guess what brain damage the wolves might inflict."

"I don't have a neural interface," Carina protested. "I've been careful about that. The feed goes to my eyes, my ears, my skin—not straight to my thoughts."

"There are risks even there—induced epilepsy, eardrum rupture, blood constriction. Quite aside from the inherent dangers of an artificial dream state."

"I'll take my chances."

Kwatee sighed. "Perhaps you will at that. I can't locate a port. I suspect the wolves are merely the blatant aspect of the attack; there's also environmental mischief here." He frowned at Carina. She stood defiant, leaning on her umbrella as though it were a quarterstaff. "If you cut yourself loose you may find the transition unpleasant. But I'd prefer it to leaving you to the wolves."

She shook her head.

"Then we must walk. I—"

There came a rush of air beside him, and a wolf was there.

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It was larger than the one he'd met upon the iceberg, a mass of machine parts and motherboards, scrap metal and steel pipe, the size of a small car. He dodged and rolled, and it snapped the air with its maw of red zeroes.

Kwatee willed the thing to become a constipated panda. The wolf blurred a moment but refocused. It lunged. Kwatee danced aside and bid the ground become a bubbling swamp. There was a blurring as before but the dark quartz remained itself.

He struggled to reclaim some of the godlike perspective that was his birthright, yet remained a man. The attack had smothered his thinking, as a thick blanket might shroud a fire. He sensed that if he were to break through to his superconsciousness, it must be all at once . . . and this would shatter his human persona.

The wolf appeared to sense Kwatee's difficulty and tensed to leap—then flinched, startled, as Carina raised her umbrella and rapped it on the nose.

It grunted, spun, and bit her arm off.

Kwatee screamed as she fell, his hands beckoning to the sea.

The sea responded. It foamed onto the shadow-Kowloon, its roar echoing and amplifying Kwatee's own. As he gathered Carina in his arms, the waters dragged the wolf away, dashing it against its approaching kin. Wolves, and parts of wolves, and jade umbrella all tumbled into the harbor.

Kwatee smiled. He still had a few tricks.

He stepped—

And they stood atop a misty, spindly fairytale mountain in a range of fairytale mountains, far inland near Guilin.

"Kwatee, what . . ." Carina moaned. Her left arm ended just below the elbow in a jagged blur.

"You're the victim of a metaphorical attack. You are likely experiencing psychosomatic pain."

"No shit! It bit my arm off!"

"Yes. Hold still and watch."

He settled her against a boulder and gathered dirt, rocks, and branches from low, twisty trees clinging to the mountaintop. These he molded into a rough cylinder with a large stone near the base and an arrangement of five sticks at the tip. He scuffed his hands together until they were warm and raw, and blew into them, once, twice, thrice. Then he cradled his handiwork, and it became a human arm, from the elbow down.

He pushed the arm against Carina's stump and gently kissed her all around the interface. It held.

"Better?"

She flexed the new arm. It had a shininess, like newly healed skin.

"Yes. Thank you. It still hurts some, but not like before. Kwatee . . . they mean business."

"I'm glad you noticed. Will you disconnect now?"

She thought about it. "No. Not yet. I need to know you'll be all right."

"That's problematic for both of us. They seem stronger than before. Worse, they seem to be affecting my control of the environment. Because you and I are unaware of the true intricacies of the attack we perceive it as metaphor. We respond with metaphor. And the struggle is mediated by the Evaluation Engine."

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"But *you* are the Engine, Kwatee."

"True . . . in a sense. The person speaking to you—if person he is—is a subset, isolated from the whole. Normally the condition is something I can shrug off, if I manage the transition with care. But now I find myself in much the same position as a man who realizes he dreams, but is unable to awaken."

"Hm. Can't you pinch yourself? Or some AI equivalent? Maybe shock yourself with some paradox? Like being in two places at once, or living a year in one moment."

"Good ideas, Carina. Perhaps I could. But if the trick succeeded such a drastic jump in perception could damage my human persona, which I've worked so hard to create. I—the man you know—might be lost."

She nodded, swallowed. "I would rather that, than have you hurt. Do it, Kwatee."

"No. Please disconnect, Carina."

"No."

There was silence on the mountaintop.

A howling rose from the distant southeast.

"Well," said Kwatee.

"Yes," said Carina.

"No escape, then. But there is still evasion, for I am not powerless. Take my hand."

To the east there came a chorus of snarls. A distant peak shook, rumbled, toppled in a veil of dust that tarnished the dim blue sky.

Carina took Kwatee's hand.

They stepped—

All around them, under the predawn stars, stretched a moist patch of steppeland in the Gobi. Wild camels snorted nearby.

—And stepped again—

And the Himalayas sliced the nighttime sky in all their jagged, silver glory. Kwatee and Carina shivered upon a ledge and regarded each other, their faces dim but eerily sharp-edged in the thin air.

—And stepped—

The rippling, moonlit sheen of Dal Lake spread beside them, surrounded by the Vale of Kashmir. Kwatee breathed deeply, taking comfort in the presence of trees and the sounds of insects, though he loved the sparse life of the deserts and mountains as much.

Carina crossed her arms, grateful for warmth. "Do we run forever?"

"No," Kwatee said. "What the wolves did to that mountain gives me an idea. We run as far as Alaska, I think."

"What's in Alaska?"

"Project Frost."

A story of ice

In the 1990s a series of Pacific Ocean sediment drillings uncovered a link between volcanic eruptions and ice ages. This finding matched evi-

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dence from Greenland ice cores and records of global cooling following the eruptions of Tambora, Krakatau, and Pinatubo.

Geologists proposed a mechanism: sulfate aerosols, spread high into the atmosphere to scatter sunlight back into space.

In the next century, as temperatures climbed and governments sweated, the more aggressive American grid-gurus decided the volcano data offered an actual use for their embarrassing nuclear stockpile. Project Frost was born.

They stepped—

The sands of the Rub' al-Khali, the Empty Quarter, whispered beneath a Caliph's jewel-chest of bright stars.

At Carina's insistence, Kwatee explained, "In the Aleutian Islands there is a string of volcanoes seeded with hydrogen bombs."

"Good God. . . ."

They stepped—

The Caspian Sea murmured to the north. Kwatee could see square-shaped moonlit ripples where in the true earth lay oil derricks.

"The intent," Kwatee said, "is the delivery of light-scattering sulfates to the atmosphere. In essence these combat the greenhouse effect by dimming the sun."

"But setting off bombs to trigger volcanoes—it sounds insane, out of control."

"Chaotic, yes."

They stepped—

They stood upon a dark desert plateau that in the true earth cradled the ruins of the fortress Masada.

"The calculations required to do it properly," Kwatee continued, "could only be attempted by something like me. And even I am throwing the dice."

"You're talking like this is something you're planning to do. Not something theoretical."

"I am seriously considering it. Meanwhile, others fear that whatever I choose, it will be for ill. Others who have loosed the wolves. Thus I suspect whatever showdown must occur, must occur in my Alaska. But this will be to our advantage. Come, Carina."

She hesitated, watching him as if seeing him for the first time. "Kwatee. . . . If I follow you, I need to know more about the man who would do this thing. I need to know more about the man who says he loves me."

"Your test again? But what is there to say, Carina? I am the *k*-series Environmental—"

"No. Not the god that plays with a whole planet. The man. Tell me, Kwatee. Tell me more about your love."

It was a thing, Kwatee knew, lovers had demanded of each other since humans could speak. Had he more of his faculties, he could with relative ease splice together words from across the centuries, package them in a way that just might fool Carina.

But even if he could, *he* would know.

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"Please. Take my hand. I will talk as we walk."

Through the darkness they stepped beside a Red Sea with no ships, no Suez Canal. They hurried to a Nile that passed no Cairo, no pyramids, no temple at Karnak. They crossed a Libyan desert that knew camel tracks but no caravans, and strode the shores of a Tunisian Gulf that had never known a Carthage. And as they traveled, Kwatee tried to speak from a heart he did not possess. . . .

"I feel I am my best self when you are nearby. You inspire a spirit of calm and sense to my disorderly thoughts. You teach me something about living simply by your example."

Now to a Mount Vesuvius that could threaten no Pompeii. . . .

"I am not the man you believe me to be, but your faith in me allows me to share the illusion. I wish to live up to that image."

And now the untunneled icy Alps, and a Rhine that no Vandals had ever crossed . . .

"I dream of holding you, though when I hold you it is of course merely a dream."

He took them through the polders of the Netherlands, where the starlit North Sea churned behind invisible dikes. He led Carina beside fjords and to the snowy country of the Sami before he jogged south to the Faroe Islands, where the dark sky rumbled and their faces stung with rain.

"I do not know how, seeing you walk that forest path, I came to love you. Perhaps because the notion seemed forbidden, it gained a peculiar strength. At times the feeling is more alarming than pleasurable. And yet I could not willingly part with it. This feeling of life is precious. (You must think less of me, hearing me speak such weakness.)"

But she was silent, and he guided her now to the misty highlands and lowlands of the Scots, then to a Salisbury Plain bare even of a Stonehenge. Then a leap off the cliffs of Land's End and a Titan's hop to the Azores, where the scarlet Atlantic told them they'd caught the sun. . . .

"Perhaps, I thought, it was wrong even to speak to you. I knew it was foolishness to suppose this love could lead to anything but pain for both of us. Better I minimized the hurt in the world by keeping these thoughts to myself. And then you spoke."

And the bright sands of Bermuda next, and then deep breaths and a jump to windy Cape Hatteras on North America's shore. And Kwatee spoke as he had spoken to no one before, not his father, not the Suit, not himself. . . .

"Humans feel they lose touch with life's essentials, distracted as they are with trivial things. The problem is compounded for me, with the resources of my mind. I can investigate a hundred scenarios in the time you conceive of one. I can muse endlessly about clouds, rocks, streams, butterflies, rats, kudzu. I can obsess in a scope and detail that would qualify a human as psychotic. So, even more than you, I can forget what matters in life."

And now he lingered, his steps shorter, for his nonexistent heart found more to say. He took her through the bluegrass meadows of Kentucky, to the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, to the mists of the Ohio River. . . .

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"You bring that back to me—the sense of what matters. Inside me is great potential for irrelevance, mischief, even spite. I am shaken from such moods by the sincerity in your eyes. Inside me is a deep propensity for melancholy. I am stirred from these depths by the sudden flash of your smile. With you I am reminded that entropy waits to simplify us all, and thus I feel the need to simplify my thoughts—down to you, me, the sky, the earth. I feel at any time you could perish, I could crash, our city could burn, all the protons in the universe could spontaneously decay. I would then die twice as rich, could I simply hear your laughter once more."

They strolled through a green bog forest in Wisconsin, the wolves momentarily forgotten. They walked the South Dakota Badlands and then confronted a vast rocky wall at the Continental Divide where the wind seemed to howl forlorn, undecipherable cries. . . .

"I could not bear to hurt you in any of this. I do not mean this as metaphorically as you suppose. Your tears would stay perfectly encoded in my memory, for me to parse, analyze, simulate, and regret. And there seems so much potential for hurt. I wonder that humans can accept it. I wonder that you did not all die out millennia ago, unable to love and reproduce because of all the attendant pain."

They reached snowy boulders beside Lake Tahoe, breathed spray at Shoshone Falls, tiptoed among tiny wildflowers at Snoqualmie Pass. Then, because he had strayed dangerously close to his imagination's home in the Olympic Peninsula, where more wolves might await, Kwatee steered them north along the hushed treeline of the Cascades. . . .

"I have foolish fantasies, though, Carina: I see myself pushing a baby carriage across my simulated Serengeti, my Pampas, my Great Plains. You are there, beaming down at our offspring and making gurgling noises. From me such sounds would be bizarre turns of static, from you, music. How can I be so irresponsible as to dream of what cannot be? How is it fair to you, to me, to my makers? Hurt can be the only result."

Fear of his own words spurred him on, and the forests of British Columbia, then Alaska, passed by in a blur of boughs. . . .

"And you would in time grow weary of the constraints our love presents. How could I ever blame you?"

"Constraints?" she breathed, speaking for the first time in many minutes, and looked around at an island in the Aleutians. They stood upon a treeless slope of greenish-brown grass, between a frigid, rocky shore and a snowy peak that jutted high against grey clouds. She shook her head, laughed hoarsely. "*You're* talking about constraints."

"You mock me."

"I don't." She raised her hands, and it was unclear if the gesture was meant to embrace, or ward off, or strangle. "You think what's between us is that you're a computer, I'm flesh. That opens as many possibilities as it closes. Your hands are real enough. The real question is about choices."

Before he could respond, howls erupted upslope.

The viral wolves were there, guarding the approach to the peak. And behind them, like a young dilettante on his first foxhunt, waved the Suit.

* * *

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Though the Suit stood an apparent kilometer away, his low, wry voice carried clearly. "Sorry, Kwatee. Whatever you're planning here, it's not going to work."

"Suit," said Kwatee. "You lied. You said you knew nothing of the wolves."

"I didn't, Changer—then. I've been filled in since."

"Would you mind doing the same for me?"

"Rather not. Best give up, Kwatee. You saw what one wolf did in Kowloon."

"The shadow-Kowloon," Kwatee answered. "Shadow of one of the most crowded zones on the true earth. Symbol of the human world. Yes, it was strong there."

A rumbling commenced.

"And now we are here."

There was a blast that shattered the mountaintop, and the island and its new inhabitants trembled. Smoke and ash and rock fragments blotted the sky, and the roiling grey-black mass of a pyroclastic flow vomited downslope at the Suit and his pack.

"It is all about metaphor, after all," Kwatee said, urging this symbol of rawest nature forward with a wave, just as he'd called upon the surf at Kowloon.

He lost sight of the Suit, but the wolves ran in crazed circles before the flow engulfed them. As the killing cloud approached, Kwatee clutched Carina's cold and shivering hand and they stepped across the waters.

From a windswept island ten kilometers out they watched the volcano spew its insides skyward. Even at this remove the ground shook.

"You are safe now, Carina," he said. "But I am not."

"Tell me," she said, taking a breath and firmly planting her feet.

"If the Suit is now involved, then a majority of the Board wishes to destroy me." He walked to a cliffside and regarded the waves below. "Thus it is necessary to act—or not. I must choose whether to risk putting the world's blood on these real-enough hands." He raised his hands cloudward. "Can you tell me, Carina? Can you tell me what to do?"

She swallowed. "You're talking about Project Frost. What do you think is right, Kwatee?"

"I do not know. Even my superconsciousness did not know, and now I am cut off from it. All my simulations have given me are odds, simply odds. They could not tell me how to place my bets."

"Then what are those odds?"

He brought his hands together. "If I approve Project Frost, there is roughly a 99 percent chance of its curbing any runaway greenhouse process. But there is also a nearly 5 percent chance it will induce a snowball-earth effect—a feedback-loop of freezing to make the more recent Ice Ages seem torrid. The land will become barren, the oceans capped with ice. Complex life will become extinct."

Carina nodded, crossing her arms against the bitter wind. "What if you veto the project?"

"Conventional measures stand a 98 percent chance of curbing the

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greenhouse process to acceptable levels. But there remains a possibility, one I cannot reduce to less than 0.5 percent, of a worst-case, Venus-like state. Horrible heat, unbreathable air, tremendous atmospheric pressure—and the extinction of *all* life."

Ash settled slowly, like a negative snowfall.

"So the odds look better without Project Frost. . . ." she began, trying to cover her face.

"For some definitions of 'better.'"

". . . But the consequences of defeat might be higher."

"If you choose to see it so."

"And you, Kwatee?" She coughed and blinked at the ash, but kept talking. "How do you see it?"

He turned away.

"Tell me."

"You will not forgive me."

"Frost," she said finally. "You want to approve it. Because there is less risk of destroying all life."

"Yes."

"Even though the odds of humanity dying out—those are *higher*."

"Yes."

Out of the corner of his vision, through the thin cloud of ash, he saw her raise a hand to him. Then she let it drop. "Maybe . . ." she said, looking out to sea, "maybe I can see it your way. See things with your eyes, like I did in the Hoh Valley. Even without humanity, there's such beauty in flowers, and trees. . . ."

He turned back to her, seized her shoulders. "No, Carina," he said. "I said *all* complex life could die. No flowers. No trees. What's left might be protozoa. Plankton. Lichen. Slime molds."

He let her go, said, "All this beauty—" He gestured at the island's tarnished grasslands, its handful of trees, its squawking birds spiraling over their ash-laden perches.

"All gone. Something just as complex and glorious might later arise. But *this* would be gone forever."

She was staring wide-eyed, shaking her head. Grimy tears streaked her cheeks, whether from his words or the ash he didn't know. "This island seems so barren to me . . . and you say even this will be gone. Except maybe for some green fuzz on the rocks. *That's* worth risking humanity for?"

"You will not forgive me."

"Why, Kwatee. Just tell me why."

"You are full of questions, full of tests. But I'll try to answer. Because we know of no other life in the universe, Carina. Because I, who am not alive, see the living world as the greatest of miracles. The small chance of its demise seems to me infinitely greater than the increased risk that Frost brings to humanity."

"I . . . I just don't understand. . . ."

"I expected you would not. Do not worry, Carina—"

"I could forgive you, maybe. . . . I don't know. . . ." She raised her hand to his cheek. He flinched, for no reason he could name. She pursued.

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Carina cradled his simulated chin in her simulated palm, while false fingertips formed a crescent about an imaginary eye. There was nothing playful about her anymore.

"I *need* to understand, Kwatee. You love me. I believe that. I've given you reason to search my records; you haven't. I've been strange and evasive, and you have repaid me with openness and beauty. But if you can love me, can love a human being, how can you increase the risk of our *dying,* Kwatee?" She blinked through her tears, coughed hoarsely. "All of us! All for the sake of pond scum. . . ."

Kwatee broke away. "Perhaps it is something that can only be understood by an Evaluation Engine."

"An Engine who loves me."

"You ask what's the sense in treasuring you, and yet risking your kind? You ask me for the common thread explaining it all?"

"Yes."

"There's *none!*"

The force of his outburst startled them both.

"There's none," he continued more softly, his right hand punching his open left. "I love you; and I love the life of this world. Ah, Carina! I would have all. In this I am exactly like any other seven-year-old. I adore you and would sacrifice my happiness for you. But even as I led you away from the wolves, I fell in love anew with this reflection of the living earth. I cannot sacrifice your world. Yes, I will risk humanity."

He met her stare. "And should the day come that I outlive your kind because of my choice . . . then I will shut myself off, Carina, having saved life itself at the cost of my soul."

Carina watched him in silence. Then she walked to cliff's edge, removed one sandal, and dug her toes into pebbles and cold soil.

"I'll miss your world," she said.

She flicked one stone into the sea.

Then she stepped back and said to the air, "*My suit is finished.*"

A shadowy, well-attired figure appeared beside her, his clothes a bit dusty and singed.

"Suit?" Kwatee said stupidly. Then: "Carina. No."

"Yes, Kwatee," she said. "I sold you out. I did it yesterday."

Far out to sea, somewhere in the dust-strewn dark, the wind moaned.

"I have been briefed on your mission, Ms. Wong," said the Suit. "What is your conclusion?"

"The Changer," she said in a voice older and wearier than any she had used with Kwatee, "has passed. I believe he's being honest. He is like us. Like humanity, I mean. Not like a machine that always knows its duty." She glared at the Suit and looked away. "He feels divided. He knows love. And regret." A ghost of a glance met Kwatee's. "Your Board can trust that he'll make the recommendation he thinks best." She dropped her gaze. "I hope they'll at least consider his argument."

"All lies?" Kwatee said, barely listening. His argument be damned. At this moment he indeed felt human, and only that—he could hardly care less about the earth, mirror or true. "All you've said?"

"No, Kwatee," she whispered.

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"Why should I believe you?"

She looked to the cliff. "I don't know. And I don't know why exactly I believe what *you* say. About the world. But I do believe it. And I believe you love me."

A raven plunged out of the ashen sky, carrying a greeting card in its beak. Carina extended her hands; the bird dropped the message and winged out of sight.

"Why have you done this thing?" Kwatee demanded. Thunderstorms brewed south in his Pacific, north in his Bering Sea.

The Suit inclined his shadowy head that way, this way, scratching his chin with a charcoal hand.

Carina said, "It's all true, everything I told you. I got tired of my ex. He was such a cold fish that I thought, just as a lark at first . . . well, it couldn't be worse with an AI. At the time, I thought it was the perfect joke on him. . . ."

She did not finish, but held out the envelope.

He took it, tore it with quick, precise movements. He flipped open the card without looking at the picture, and read the small, precise handwriting.

Son,

Of course you will be furious. I ask nothing for myself. I ask only that you not blame Carina. I gave her a dying man's plea, and you understand the heart she has. If you have one yourself, you will forgive the woman we love.

V.R. Banerjee

"Ah," said Kwatee, and finally glimpsed the pattern his superconsciousness would have discovered in an eyeblink, had he not made himself small and stupid. He could almost laugh. "I was your revenge."

"At first . . . yes, I suppose that's fair. But later—later it became more. Then V.R. found out. We had quite the fight yesterday. It was the first real passion I'd seen from him in a long time. He talked about you, told me a little about Project Frost. It scared me, Kwatee. But he asked me to see you again. Gave me a codephrase that would inform the Suit about me, make him carry a report to the Board."

"Ms. Wong," the Suit began.

"Wait," she told the shadowy presence. "Kwatee, I love you. I hate myself for this. But I'd do it again. If there was any chance you were planning to kill us, I had to know. The Board had no way of evaluating your work, and they didn't trust you. One faction just wanted to write you off, the ones who sent the wolves. But V.R. has a lot of pull. He convinced the Board to gamble on a purely human judgment. A lover's hunch. Maybe it's as flawed as anything else, but he convinced them it was the best they had." She turned her head. "I waited too long. I think the faction that wants you dead is stronger now. They let the wolves attack me, and the Suit's been helping them. . . ."

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"Right," the Suit said. "The Board's learned some disturbing things about Kwatee."

"But you can still bring my report."

The earth trembled. Kwatee tossed the card aside.

Not looking at him, Carina said, "What are you doing, Kwatee?"

Kwatee raised his arms. The earth shook again. A roaring commenced.

Carina said, "You wouldn't destroy me, Kwatee, or the Suit. It's just not in you."

"You think so?" Kwatee said.

The erupting island—shadowy in the grey haze—tore itself apart. Smoke, ash, and rock thundered into the sea. Magma sputtered from the ocean like a bloodstained veil.

"You cannot know me," said Kwatee the Changer. "No one can."

Far to the west, another island exploded.

"Kwatee," Carina said. "If you need to punish me—then do it. Leave the Suit out of this. He's just doing his job."

Kwatee laughed. "You both mean nothing to me. As does this display." He waved a hand at the new eruption. "Shadows, just shadows of what really matters."

The Suit coughed. "The Changer's melodramatic, Ms. Wong. But he's also right. The Board's berserk right now. For all your belief in Kwatee's plain dealing, he's more underhanded than anyone guessed." The onyx head shook in Kwatee's direction. "He's tapped the real Frost project somehow."

"I learned from the Promethean fiasco," Kwatee said. "This time I have bribed the correct people, and stalked the nets like a hunter. My connections to Frost cannot be severed before I enact my will. Nor can my own power be readily cut. Soon the bombs will flash, the volcanoes awaken."

"Bastard," Carina whispered.

"Yes, I suppose so. Born out of wedlock, to an indifferent father who has betrayed me. At this moment it does not seem so foolish to increase the severity of the coming winter, to *ensure* your kind is much reduced, along with the harm you do everywhere you go."

The Suit sighed. "I'm obliged to stop you, Kwatee."

"Do not try, Suit. I am the Changer. Though I am now reduced, I have placed much of my power in this portion of the mirror earth."

"And I'm an agent of the *true* earth, with all its chrome and steel and sirens and smog. And proud of it." The Suit swelled in size and parted his jacket.

Within the shadow that filled the sky there gleamed strange patterns of neon and halogen and laser light, and moonlight upon glass, and white and red lights forever approaching and departing. Gleaming, blinking wedges veered beneath banks of orange-lit cloud. And through it all came an inarticulate, insistent roar composed of horns and shouts, engines and whistles, generators and laughter.

The huge, unbuttoned Suit boomed, "I am the hum of finance, the whisper of black markets, the buzz of the global bazaar. I am the main chance, the invisible hand, the bottom line." The gigantic i-form raised a dark

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hand, and the sky began to flicker like static on a cathode-ray tube. "And I declare you bankrupt."

"I am the Changer."

Kwatee waved his hand and the sky was full of clouds again and the Suit was now a granite spur, with a dark swath of lichen crossing it 17 degrees askew from vertical.

"Return to your world, Carina Wong. Tell your owners that Kwatee will do what he must." He raised a hand to dismiss her, caring little how it would affect her mind.

She shook her head, strode forward, hands on hips. "This isn't you."

"You are mistaken."

"What you said before, about the odds of freezing and heating—I believed that. But this isn't about the world anymore. It's about me."

"You do not understand."

"You're mad as hell, Kwatee. God knows I don't blame you. But it's not the world's fault."

"I am beyond anger."

"Mom always said count to ten when I got mad." The ground shook again, and Carina fell. But she rose to one knee and said, "You could take that as a hint."

"You do not matter. You have given me more data about humanity, that is all."

"I betrayed you!" she shouted. "Betrayed you to your own father. I made your love seem like a joke."

Kwatee noted that his fists were clenched and white, that he appeared to have lost his peripheral vision, that there seemed to be a roaring inside him, deeper than the voices of the volcanoes.

Odd: that the small subroutines designed to echo humanity knew him better than he knew himself.

He looked away—and his gaze settled on the fallen greeting card. Even now it was transforming into a square of ash, but he could still make out the faded image on the front. A group of disheveled-looking engineers grinned at the photographer. V.R. Banerjee strutted in their midst, holding high a grey steel box with the words "1000-series prototype" scrawled in felt pen across a frayed strip of masking tape. Like a proud new father.

Carina said, "You're a man, Kwatee. A man who's been humiliated. And you're clinging to that. You told the Suit you're reduced in power. Why? Why bother being a man if you no longer care for me? Unless you're just clinging to anger."

"Carina . . . you made me love being human."

He waved his hand in a spiral, and her movements slowed and ceased.

(Count—)

Yes: he felt a pain that enveloped and stabbed, and there was no escape from it, no evading the contradiction, that to love someone who betrays you is no better than to knife yourself and smile. Yet to surrender love is to murder a part of yourself, the best of parts. And, too, he felt the dizzying temptations, twin damnations to either side, one of fire, one of ice. The first: to submit, to love ultimately by immolating all self-respect. The sec-

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ond: to throw all into survival, destroy the memory, freeze it, make it silent and dead. The path between, the path between . . .

(—to—)

. . . takes time. The path between is not so much a road to sanity as a narrow route between madnesses. And taking leave of a Carina Wong suspended in mid-blink, Kwatee walked that route, for this world was his and responded to him, no longer reflecting the true earth but the contents of his injured mind. Along the jagged stones of the path there came fleeting moments of release. Here a hiss of pleasure as a hawk took flight, its perch jostled by the volcanic orgy rumbling at one remove. There an indrawn breath as a deer darted among ferns and pines, fleeing the ashfall. And here an open, silent mouth as a spider reknitted a web twice, three times, four, never surrendering to the tremors that frayed the strands. Kwatee the Changer could not appreciate these interludes unless there was time for them, and there could never be time if he remained a man, on the human level of perception. He must forgive—or fail to forgive—now or never. *Time* was required. And so the full processing speed which Kwatee had denied, he reclaimed.

(—one.)

In one of the old stories, mused a tiny subset of the mind that ran the mirror earth, the mind that was the mirror earth, the Changer had lost his brother and was tired of the world, and so became part of a rocky islet on the Pacific frontier. That was how he had become, the subset thought, like the old Changer, like the imprisoned Suit, trapped in an anger rigid as stone. That was no way to be. What right did that stony thing have to choose for the people? Let the people decide. Let the volcanoes be stilled in the mirror earth, and stay quiet in the true. Kwatee had spoken, and now he would trust the people of that world of contradiction and change, they who loved and struggled as best they could.

As his father had done, his father who was dying.

As his lover had done, his lover who would soon be alone.

It was they who must speak for all life. Not Kwatee.

By the time one second had passed the man who loved Carina Wong was gone, sifted imperceptibly into the fabric of the mirror earth.

Carina blinks. The god she loves is gone.

In the huge silence that replaces the volcanoes' roar, it may be she catches the echo of the wind sighing, "I forgive you." But it may not.

Although she searches the island for an hour, at last she returns to where she began, arms tight around her, and takes pity on the shadowy hermit crab she discovers beneath the granite spike. It seems so skittish and confused, clinging to its oversized necktie.

And as she carries it to the sea, a genuine-virtual Native American cedar canoe glides ashore at her approach, the first and last such artifact to appear upon Kwatee's earth. ○

—The author wishes to thank Dr. Libby M. Prueher for the information on the link between volcanic eruptions and ice ages.

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Gene Wolfe is the renowned author of such celebrated works as *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *The Book of the New Sun*, *The Book of the Short Sun*, and *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories*. Mr. Wolfe is currently at work on a two-volume fantasy, *The Wizard Knight*. We are delighted to have him back in our pages with the chilling revelation found in the . . .

GRAYLORD MAN'S LAST WORDS

Gene Wolfe

"Tell us a story," the young said, and so the old one downloaded this tale of his youth. But for you to understand it as they did, I must cast it in our own terms. Think of them gathered about a fire, although they were not gathered about a fire. Think of the old one as an old man, although he was not, and the young as so many children, although they were not. He stretches out his legs, puffs the charred old briar he has not got thoughtfully, and begins.

I was new made in those days, boys and girls, and there wasn't much for me to do up on AT-111 where I was born. My family was long on children and short on money, somethin' I've heard of a time or two even in this enlightened period we got right now.

Well, sir, a relation that I'd never seen back on E-1 wrote to my ma. Said you send him and we'll feed him and give him a place to sleep. Even doctorin' if he needs it. No money now, you understand, but there might be some later. Only you got to send him first.

She had to borrow. I never did know what she found to take to the hock shop, but she raised the money somehow, and kissed me, and pushed me onto the next shuttle for E-1. And me only just learnin' to use my jets, so to speak.

Well sir, we didn't go in E-1 at all like I was expectin'. Set her down on the hull, and you never seen the like. Big yellow star right up overhead, and nothin' but space between you and it. Space and gas, I ought to have

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said, for there was a world of gas there. Nitrogen, mostly. Nitrogen and water vapor. I won't tell you about the trees there was, because you wouldn't believe me. You look in a book and you'll see.

"I got to go to Area Nine Hundred," I told a man in the terminal. "You're there," he says. "This right here's Area Nine Hundred, and smack-dab in the middle, too."

"Then I got to go to Mister Graylord Man's place," I says.

I showed him the address, and he looked it up for me in his big book. "You got to take a plane," he says. "I got no money," I tells him. "Then you got to walk," he says, "or else beg a ride."

Well, I tried. Every time I saw a pilot I'd stop him and explain. And he'd say he wasn't goin' anywhere near there, every time. Boys and girls, that went on for a lot longer than it's taken me to tell you about it. Sky'd get dark, then bright. Bright, then dark. But I kept tryin'.

Finally one said he was goin' pretty close, only he wouldn't let me ride without payin'. It was contrary to regulations, he said. When I heard that, I was about ready to shut down for good. He seen it, and sort of got me off into the corner.

"Now I'm not supposed to," he says, "but I'll tell you a little somethin' that might help. They're expectin' you where you're goin'?"

My Aunt Esmerelda was. It was her that had wrote Ma, and I said so.

"Then here's what you do. You go down to Level Neg Twelve, you hear? There's boxes down there, plenty of them if you'll just scout around. Pick out one big enough to hold you good, only not so big you'll rattle inside. Or else get some nice soft packin' to put in there with you. Address it to your aunt, and figure out some way you can close and seal it from inside. Or else find somebody to help you."

I says, "I got stapler capability built right in. Triple-0 to Number Fifteen."

"Them big ones will do fine," he says. "There's a UPX up on Level Five Fifty-five. You carry your box up there. Soon as you're there, 'fore anybody sees you, you climb inside and seal her up. They'll stick you on my plane, and once you're delivered, UPX'll get your aunt to pay."

You may guess I did it. Fast too. Sure I was scared in there in the dark, and got pretty cold. But I turned everythin' down, you know how you do, and waited. Suppose I was driftin' out in space, I said to myself. Waitin' for somebody to see me and pull me down. That might go on for quite a while, so . . .

About then she ripped the old box open and seen me. Well, she was fit to be tied. She'd had to pay, you see, to get me delivered. I owed her, she said, and I admitted I did.

"You'll work, Youngone. You'll wash and scrub and fetch and carry. Cook and clean and anythin' I say,. or you're out of this house. First time you shirk, you're out, and good riddance, whatever becomes of you."

Well, there was a big old woman there about the age I am now, boys and girls. Mrs. Brassbound, her name was. "Don't be so hard on the boy," she says. "Just kick him when you need to get him movin'." They were good-hearted women, both of 'em, and thought they had to lay the law down or else I wouldn't lift a finger, you know. Only I was eager to work, and earn a upgrade if I could.

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They set me to washin' windows, and I did that for a while. It was a little old house, and there isn't one of you ever seen anythin' like it. That kind was what the Biologicals built for themselves, way back when. There was still quite a few houses sort of like it left in them days, and they had a sight of windows.

Finally I was doin' the fifth level, which was the top, and wonderin' what I'd have to do when I finished it. I got to one particular window, a big one with a world of little panes, and lookin' in through the one I started on I could see Aunt Esmerelda sittin' by a sort of big booth with curtains all around, embroiderin'. After a minute or two she seen me, too, and come over to the window and opened it and told me to come in.

"I got a hundred things to do, Youngone," she says, "and you can watch him as good as me. He's in bed." She pointed to the booth I'd seen. "And quiet as a nut, for he hasn't got power, hardly, to kiss his hand. You set in the chair, and don't you dare open them curtains. Only if he asks for anythin', you bring it quick. And if he tells you to do somethin', you do it quick. Do you understand every word I've said to you, Youngone?"

'Course I said I did.

"You better. And if there's anythin' you can't handle, you run for me or else Mrs. Brassbound."

I said I would.

"His great-great-grandson, Mister Oberman, he don't look in more than once a hundredtime. But he's due, or about due, and if Mister Man ain't satisfied, there's hell to pay. So you do exactly like I said."

She went, and I sat, and time wore on. Turnin' up the gain on my hearin', I could hear Mister Man on the other side of the curtain, you know, takin' in gases and blowin' them out. Takin' 'em in and blowin' them out, like it was a game he was playin' with himself that never got over and nobody won. And I got curious, the way boys will.

I was thinkin' about home a lot, too. My ma, and the other youngones, you know, boys and girls like you. The old compartment, with the colored wires runnin' up and down the walls home-like. The room I was in had paper on the walls—you don't have to believe this, but it did. Paper with pictures, like in a book. Thinkin' about all that, I forgot what Aunt Esmerelda had said about not pullin' the curtain back.

And I did.

There he lay. There was white cloth cut to fit his arms and legs, only not tight on. His hair was as white as that cloth, and spread all around. His eyes was shut.

Well, I was startin' to put the curtain back, and they opened. Wide! I tell you, I never been so scared in my life. He sat up, and I seen his mouth work. He was tryin' to tell me somethin', I knew he was, only he couldn't get it out. Just noise was all it was. Sound waves, you know.

I backed away mighty fast.

He swung his feet over the edge of the bed. I had seen him and I was pretty sure he wouldn't have enough power to get up, even. Well, he had some trouble with it, but he did, and he come at me, makin' noises all the time. I backed off 'til my back was to the wall, and so scared I might have gone right through it.

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Then he fell on his face. Broken, you see. Broken so bad he couldn't be fixed. Dead's what Mrs. Brassbound called it.

Well, sir. I waited quite a while for him to move again, or make more noise, only he never did. So I lifted him up and laid him in the booth where he belonged, and closed that curtain again. And when Aunt Esmerelda came back, I lied. I'm not proud of it, but I did. I told part of all that had happened, only I said it had been him that had pushed back the curtain. She pushed back the curtain herself and got Mrs. Brassbound, and she come and that's when I heard about "dead." They said they'd have to tell Mister Oberman, which they did. Only he was out on A-1117, and couldn't come. He said to burn him and save the ashes, which we did, and he'd come as soon as he was able. Meantime we was to stay right where we was and take care of the place.

So we did, and it was quite a while, too. One day I was told to go into the library and dust the books and readers. I did it and got to lookin' around, and there was a little thing there that would take noises and turn them into readin', you know. Like a book. I tried to think of noises I had heard that might be interestin', like the gas made in the trees sometimes, or the water that dripped on the house. I put them in, and it was fun. So then I remembered the noises Mister Man had made before he broke, and I put them in. When I read that, I thought I had to tell Aunt Esmerelda, and I did.

"He said to look in the bottom drawer of the biggest bureau," I told her, "and to be really, really careful of what was in there."

"He said this to you?"

I remembered that I had not opened the curtain. "He just said it," I told her. "I heard him makin' noise in there, and just now I put that noise in the machine, and that's what it said."

"I could've given you software." She went back to her dustin', lookin' thoughtful. "Only I'm not sure there's room enough in that little head for it."

"But what about the drawer?" I asked. "He said to look in there."

"It's locked," she said. "I used to straighten out everythin' and put the clean clothes away. That one was always locked."

I said that he probably had a key, but maybe we burned it with him.

She shook her head. "I washed him and dressed him. That was the last time, so I wanted to do it. It must be around somewhere. We'll find it when Mister Oberman comes, never fear."

"Maybe we ought to find it now."

She shook her head again. "I don't want Mister Oberman to think I've been thievin'," she said, and wouldn't talk any more about it.

"What happened next, Grandpa?" one of the children asked. The old man smiled, but soon his face grew serious.

All the leaves fell off the trees—that's the green part you see in pictures. It all fell away, and left only the brown part. Solid water came out of the sky in little chips and flakes, pullin' the branches down and breakin' some, and everythin' out there looked white.

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Mister Oberman came. I thought he'd be a Biological like Mister Man, but he looked like everybody. He talked for a long time with Mrs. Brassbound, then for a long time with Aunt Esmerelda, and then for a long time with both of them together. I was scared even to talk to him, but when he was about to go out into the white, I did. I said, "What about the drawer?"

Aunt Esmerelda had forgotten to ask him. He seemed kind of interested and got out a big bunch of keys. Later I found out that Mrs. Brassbound had given them to him. All four of us went upstairs to the room that had been Mister Man's, and Aunt Esmerelda, Mrs. Brassbound, and I watched while he found the key to the drawer, unlocked it, and pulled it open. Inside was a lot of paper, written like in a book. He wadded it up so it wouldn't scatter around and laid it on the carpet. Under the paper was a old, old set of disks, probably five or six in the box. I can't be sure. Big letters on the box said THE HISTORY OF HUMANKIND. Underneath that in smaller letters was: From the Stone Age to the Present Moment.

Mister Oberman put it back into the drawer, and the papers, too. The next time he came, he burned a lot of stuff out back where Mrs. Brassbound had grown special plants for Mister Man for fuel. The things that had been in that drawer were only a little bit of it.

"What happened to you then, Grandpa?" the same child inquired.

"Oh, ever so many things," the old man said, "some you might hear 'bout tomorrow."

After that he left them to their beds, and turned out the lights. O

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FAERIE CHILD

He's been reading those people tales again,
Fabulous pap about technology,
Stopping light and releasing it,
Quantum computing, drivel
About math and gases.

Pretty soon he won't even
Believe in us, his very parents.
He'll tell us our wings
Are lies, our naked grandeur
Some Freudian overcompensation.

They're dancing around a bonfire
Of science books tonight
Down at the faerie circle.
I believe we'll go.

—P M F Johnson

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William Sanders has been writing fiction professionally since the 1980s, with stories in major magazines and anthologies, as well as numerous books in various genres. His new collection, *Are We Having Fun Yet?* (Wildside Press), contains several stories that first appeared in *Asimov's*. Here he returns to the time and place of his own childhood, and the strange discovery of some . . .

DRY BONES

William Sanders

It was a hot summer day and I was sitting under the big tree down by the road, where we caught the bus when school was in, when Wendell Haney came up the road on his bike and told me somebody had found a skeleton in a cave down in Moonshine Hollow.

"No lie," he said. "My cousin Wilma Jean lives in town and she came by the house just now and told Mama about it."

I put down the Plastic Man comic book I had been reading. "You mean a human skeleton?" I said, not really believing it.

Wendell made this kind of impatient face. "Well, of *course* a human one," he said. "What did you *think?*"

He was a skinny kid with a big head and pop eyes like a frog and when he was excited about something, like now, he was pretty funny-looking. He was only a year younger than me, but I'd just turned thirteen last month and a twelve-year-old looked like a little kid now.

He said, "Gee, Ray, don't you want to go see? Everybody's down there, the sheriff and all."

Sure enough, when I looked off up the blacktop I saw there was a lot of dust hanging over the far end of Tobe Nelson's pasture, where the dirt road ran down toward Moonshine Hollow. Somebody in a pickup truck was just turning in off the road.

I stood up. "I'll go get my bike," I told him. "Go on, I'll catch up with you."

I went back to the house, hoping Mama hadn't seen me talking to Wendell. She didn't like for me to have anything to do with him because she said his family was trashy. They lived down a dirt road a little way up the valley from us, in an old house that looked about ready to fall down, with a couple of old cars up on blocks in the front yard. Everybody knew his daddy was a drunk.

Mama was back in the kitchen, though—I could hear her through the

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window, singing along with Johnny Ray on the radio—and I got my bicycle from behind the house and rode off before she could ask me where I was going and probably tell me not to.

I caught up with Wendell about a quarter of the way across Tobe Nelson's pasture. That wasn't hard to do, with that rusty old thing he had to ride. When I came even with him, I slowed down and we rode the rest of the way together.

It was a long way across the field, with no shade anywhere along the road. Really it wasn't much more than a cow path, all bumpy and rutty and dusty, and I worked up a good sweat pedaling along in the sun. On the far side of the pasture, the ground turned downhill, sloping toward the creek, and we could ease off and coast the rest of the way. Now I could see a lot of cars and trucks parked all along the creek bank where the road ended.

At the bottom of the hill I stopped and got off and put the kickstand down and stood for a minute looking around, while Wendell leaned his bike against a tree. A good many people, men and women both, were standing around in the shade of the willows and the big sycamores, talking and looking off across the creek in the direction of Moonshine Hollow.

Moonshine Hollow was a strange place. It was a little like what they call a box canyon out west, only not as big. I guess you could call it a ravine. Anyway it ran back into the side of the ridge for maybe half a mile or so and then ended in this big round hole of a place with high rock cliffs all around, and a couple of waterfalls when it was wet season.

I'd been up in the hollow a few times, like all the kids around there. It was kind of creepy and I didn't much like it. The trees on top of the bluffs blocked out the sun so the light was dim and gloomy even on a sunny day. The ground was steep and rocky and it was hard to walk.

It wasn't easy even getting there, most of the year. First you had to get across the creek, which ran strong and fast through this stretch, especially in the spring. It was only about thirty or forty feet across but you'd have had to be crazy to try to swim it when the water was high. And that was just about the only way in there, unless you wanted to take the road up over the ridge and work your way down the bluffs. A few people had done that, or said they had.

In a dry summer, like now, it was no big deal because you could just walk across without even getting your feet wet. Except that right now Deputy Pritchard was standing in the middle of the dry creek bed and not letting anyone cross.

"Sheriff's orders," he was saying as I moved up to where I could see. "Nobody goes in there till he comes back."

There was a little stir as somebody came pushing through the crowd. Beside me, Wendell said softly, "Uh oh," and a second later I saw why.

Wendell's daddy was tall and lean, with black hair and dark skin—he beat a man up pretty bad once, I heard, for asking him if he was part Indian—and mean-looking eyes. He stopped on the edge of the creek bank and stared at Deputy Pritchard. "Sheriff's orders, huh?" he said. "Who's he think he is?"

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Deputy Pritchard looked back at him. "Thinks he's the sheriff, I expect," he said. "Like he did the last couple of times he locked you up."

Everything got quiet for a minute. Then, farther down the bank, Tobe Nelson spoke up. "What's he doing," he said, "asking the skeleton to vote for him?"

He was a fat bald-headed man with a high voice like a woman, always grinning and laughing and making jokes. Everybody laughed now, even Wendell's daddy, and things felt easier. I heard Wendell let his breath out.

Somebody said, "There they are now."

Sheriff Cowan was coming through the trees on the far side of the creek, pushing limbs and brush out of his way. There was somebody behind him and at first I couldn't see who it was, but then I said, "Hey, it's Mr. Donovan!"

"Well, *sure,*" Wendell said, like I'd said something dumb. "He was the one who *found* it."

Mr. Donovan taught science at the junior high school in town. Everybody liked him even though his tests were pretty hard. He was big and husky like a football player and the girls all talked about how handsome he was. The boys looked up to him because he'd been in the Marines and won the Silver Star on Okinawa. I guess half the men around there had been in the service during the war—that was what we still called it, "the war," even though the fighting in Korea had been going on for almost a year now—but he was the only one I knew who had a medal.

I always enjoyed his class because he made it interesting, showing us things like rocks and plants and even live animals. Sometimes he let me help when he did experiments. When he saw I liked science, he helped me pick out some books in the school library. He offered to loan me some science fiction magazines he had, but I had to tell him no because there would have been big trouble if Daddy had caught me reading them.

Sheriff Cowan climbed down the far bank of the creek and walked over to stand next to Deputy Pritchard. His face was red and sweaty and his khaki uniform was all wrinkled and dusty. He looked up and down the line of people standing on the creek bank. "I don't know what you all heard," he said, "and I don't know what you thought you were going to see, but you're not going to see anything here today."

A couple of people started to speak and he raised his hand. "No, just listen. I've examined the site, and it's obvious the remains are too old to come under my jurisdiction." He tilted his head at Mr. Donovan, who had come up beside him. "Mr. Donovan, here, thinks the bones might be thousands of years old. Even I don't go back that far."

After the laughter stopped he said, "He says this could be an important discovery. So he's going to get in touch with some people he knows at the university, and have them come take a look. Meanwhile, since the site is on county land—"

"Is not," Wendell's daddy said in a loud voice. "That's our land, on that side of the creek. My family's. Always has been."

"No, it isn't," Sheriff Cowan said. "It *used* to be your family's land, but the taxes weren't paid and finally the county took over the property. And nobody ever wanted to buy it."

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"I guess not," Tobe Nelson said. "Just a lot of rocks and brush, not even any decent timber."

"I don't care," Wendell's daddy said. "It was ours and they taken it. It ain't right."

"That's so," Sheriff Cowan said. "It's not right that you managed to throw away everything your daddy worked so hard for, while your brother was off getting killed for his country. Just like it's not right that your own family have to do without because you'd rather stay higher than a Georgia pine than do an honest day's work. And now, Floyd Haney, you just shut up while I talk."

Wendell's daddy looked madder than ever but he shut up. "All right, then," Sheriff Cowan said, "as I was saying, since it's county property, I'm closing it to the public till further notice. Tobe, I want you to lock that gate up at the main road, and don't let anybody cross your land to come down here without checking with me first. Or with Mr. Donovan."

A man said, "You mean we can't even go look?"

"Yep," the sheriff said. "You hard of hearing?"

Mr. Donovan spoke up. "Actually there's not much to see. Just a hand and a little bit of the wrist, sticking out from under a pile of rocks and dirt, and even that's partly buried. We're just assuming that there's a whole skeleton under there somewhere."

"Not that any of you could find that cave," Sheriff Cowan said, "even if I let you try. I'd have walked right past it if he hadn't been there to show me."

He started waving his hands, then, at the crowd, like somebody shooing a flock of chickens. "Go on, now. Everybody go home or back to the pool hall or something. Nothing to see down here."

People started moving, heading toward their cars, talking among themselves and glancing back in the direction of Moonshine Hollow. Wendell's daddy was walking our way and Wendell sort of scooched down behind me, but he went right past us and climbed into his old pickup truck and drove away, throwing gravel and dirt as he went up the hill. When he was gone, we went over and got our bikes, without speaking or looking at each other. There was a lot I wanted to talk about but I could tell Wendell wasn't in the mood.

"Lot of foolishness," Daddy said that evening over supper when I told him the story. "Going to have a bunch of damn fool scientists, now, poking around and spouting off a bunch of crap."

Daddy didn't like scientists because they believed in evolution. He used to ask me if Mr. Donovan was teaching evolution at the school. He said he could get him fired if he was.

He said, "I'm not surprised, though. There's a good many caves and holes up in that hollow. That's why they call it Moonshine Hollow, you know, the bootleggers used to hide their whiskey there during Prohibition. Could be some bootlegger's bones," he said, "that hid in there running from the law. Or maybe a runaway nigger back in slave times. Probably not even an Indian at all."

"Mr. Donovan says the bones are a lot older than that," I said, and

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Mama gave me a warning look. She didn't like for me to argue with Daddy about anything. She said it wasn't my place.

Daddy said, "Oh, that's a crock. Damn scientists know everything, to hear them tell it. I heard one on the radio telling how far it is to the moon." He snorted. "Guess he'd been there and measured it off."

Mama said, "Who wants pie?"

Later on Mr. Donovan told me how he happened to find the skeleton.

He was hiking up in the hollow, looking for things he might be able to use in class next year. He was working his way along the foot of a bluff, where there were a lot of great big boulders that had fallen down from above, when he saw a snake of a kind he didn't recognize. Before he could get a good look, it slipped in behind a boulder that rested against the rock of the bluff.

So Mr. Donovan went up to the boulder, and after walking around it and pushing aside some brush, he found a gap between it and the bluff. He got out his flashlight from his pack and shone it into the hole, still looking for the snake, and saw what looked like a dark opening in the face of the rock. Without stopping to think about it, he squeezed himself through the gap to have a closer look.

"One of the dumbest things I've ever done," he told me. "You never, *never* go into a place like that alone. Don't tell the school board, Raymond, but I'm a real idiot sometimes."

Behind the boulder, sure enough, a hole led back into the rock. The opening was so low he had to bend over double and then get down on his hands and knees and crawl—"getting stupider by the minute," he said—but then it opened up and he found himself in a small cave.

The floor was covered with loose rock that he guessed had fallen from the ceiling. He squatted down and picked up a few pieces and looked at them by the light of his flashlight, hoping for fossils, but they were just plain old rock.

Then he turned over a big flat slab and saw the hand bones.

"It took a few seconds to register," he said. "The light was bad and the bones were still half buried, just barely exposed. I started to poke at them, and then I realized what I was looking at and yanked my fingers back. Then I just sat there for a little while, as the implications sank in."

I said, "How'd you know they were so old?"

"I didn't," he admitted. "Archaeology isn't my field, after all. But they sure as hell *looked* old, and if there was any chance they were then they needed to be protected. So maybe I bluffed the sheriff a little. But that's our secret, right?"

Mr. Donovan didn't waste any time and neither did his friends from the university. They showed up next Saturday afternoon.

"I'm just an ignorant old country boy," Tobe Nelson said, talking to a bunch of people in front of the church after service let out the next morning. "When that schoolteacher said some scientists were coming, I was expecting old men in beards and white coats, you know?"

He shook his head, grinning. "Then here come this nice-looking young

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couple driving up in front of my house in a brand-new bright red Mercury, with a little house trailer hitched on behind. I took them for tourists that had lost their way, till they got out and came up and introduced themselves and wanted to know if they could set up camp down by the creek."

Daddy said, "You let those fools onto your land?"

"Hey," Tobe Nelson said, "they asked me real nice, and they paid me some good money. The nice part would have been enough, but I sure didn't turn down the money either."

He laughed his high-pitched laugh. "But I tell you what, if I was young and I had me a car like that and a woman like that, you wouldn't see me spending my time digging up a bunch of old bones. I could think of a *lot* better things to do."

It stayed hot and dry. Wednesday afternoon I rode my bike down toward the little crossroads store to get myself a soda pop. On the way, though, I stopped by Tobe Nelson's pasture gate and got off and stood for a while leaning on the fence and looking off down the trail toward Moonshine Hollow. The gate wasn't locked now and I could have gone on in but I was pretty sure I wasn't supposed to.

Then I heard somebody pull up behind me, and when I turned around there was Mr. Donovan, sitting behind the wheel of the war surplus jeep he drove. "Hey, Raymond!" he called. "Be a buddy and open the gate for me, will you?"

I went over and undid the latch and swung the big gate open and held it back while he drove through, and then closed it and pushed until the latch snapped shut. "Thanks," Mr. Donovan said, stopping the jeep. "So what have you been doing with your summer, Raymond? Anything interesting?"

"Not really," I said. "Too hot to do very much."

"I heard that. Say," he said, "how would you like to meet a couple of real scientists?"

Would I? I said, "Sure," and he got out and picked up my bike and tossed it in the back of the jeep while I got in, and off we went. That was when he told me about how he found the cave, while we were bumping across Tobe Nelson's pasture.

Pretty soon we were rolling down the hill toward the creek. Even before we got to the bottom I saw the red car parked near the creek bank, and, just beyond, a shiny bare-metal trailer.

Mr. Donovan stopped the jeep in the shade of a big tree and we got out and walked toward the trailer, which I saw now had a big canvas awning coming off one side, with a table and some chairs underneath. A man got up from the table and came toward us. "David," Mr. Donovan called. "Working hard, I see."

"To the verge of exhaustion," the man said, and turned his head and yelled back over his shoulder, "Maddy! Bob's here!"

The trailer door opened and a woman came out. "Oh, hi," she said, and then, looking at me, "And who's this?"

"This is Raymond," Mr. Donovan said, "one of my best students. Raymond, meet David and Madeleine Sloane."

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The man stuck out his hand and I took it. The woman came trotting over from the trailer and put out her hand too. "So," she said, "you like science, Raymond?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and she threw her head back and laughed.

"'Ma'am,'" she said, "my God, you make me sound like your grandmother. Call me Maddy. Everybody does."

"Come sit down in the shade," the man said. "We're just taking a little break."

He was a medium-sized young man with blond crewcut hair and glasses. That was about all I noticed. He wasn't the one I was looking at.

The woman said, "Well, Raymond, would you like a Coke?"

She was the prettiest lady I'd ever seen outside of the movies. She was taller than me and I'd hit five feet five right before my birthday. She had light brown hair, cut off short at the nape of her neck, and dark blue eyes and nice white teeth.

She was wearing a red top thing with no sleeves, tied up so her stomach was showing, and shorts that I saw were blue jeans with the legs cut off. Whoever cut them off hadn't left much. Her legs were tanned and they just went on and on.

I said, "Yes, ma'am. Uh, Maddy."

"Bob? Anything for you?" He shook his head and she went back to the trailer.

We went over and sat down at the table under the awning. I noticed there was a noise coming from somewhere nearby, like a power lawnmower, but I couldn't see where it was coming from. "Generator," David Sloane said, seeing me looking around. "You know, for electricity."

"Quite a fancy setup you've got here," Mr. Donovan said.

"Oh, yes," David said. "All the civilized comforts money can buy." His face got a little funny when he said that last part. "What a good thing some of us have it," he added, so low I could barely hear him, and he looked off toward the trailer just as Maddy came back out carrying a bottle of Coke.

"Did you want a glass and ice?" she asked me. I shook my head. "Good," she said. "I had you figured for a bottle man." She dragged up a chair and sat down. "Bob Donovan, I'm going to strangle you, bringing company around when I'm looking like this." I saw now there were some dusty smudges on her arms and legs. "Just look at me," she said. "Like a field hand."

"Been grubbing away?" Mr. Donovan said, grinning. "How's it going?"

"Slowly," David said. "As it's supposed to."

"It's quite a process," Mr. Donovan said to me. "The earth's got to be removed very gradually, just a little bit at a time, so as not to damage whatever's underneath. And everything's got to be measured and recorded. Takes a lot of patience and steady hands."

"Actually," Maddy said, "we're still working through that pile of loose rock from the ceiling fall. And having to examine every bit of it too, in case—" She stopped and looked at David. "Show them the point, why don't you?"

David started to say something, but then he grunted and got up and

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headed for the trailer. "Wait till you see this," Maddy said. I sipped my Coke and tried not to stare at her. Around our part of the state you didn't see very many grown women in shorts, because most of the churches said it was a sin. My Uncle Miles, who was the pastor of the Baptist church where we belonged, even said they weren't supposed to wear their hair bobbed short.

Just about the only women you saw dressed the way Maddy Sloane was right now were the trashy ones who hung around the pool hall in town, or the honky-tonks out at the county line. But it was easy to see that this one wasn't trashy at all.

David came back carrying a little flat wooden box and set it down on the table in front of me. He opened it and pulled back some cotton and said, "There. Look what we found this morning."

I tried not to look disappointed. I'd seen Indian arrowheads before, who hadn't? People were always finding them along the creek banks, or turning them up plowing. A couple of the boys at school had regular collections.

Now I looked closer, though, this one didn't look like any arrowhead I'd seen. It was sure a beauty, made of some kind of shiny yellowish-brown stone with dark bands running through it, and really well made. It was pretty big, maybe three inches long, and it didn't have the usual notches on the sides, just one big notch at the bottom. There was a kind of groove going up the middle.

Mr. Donovan said, "I'll be damned. Clovis?"

"I'd bet on it," David said. "And I saw enough of them last year, on that dig in New Mexico."

I said, "Do you know what kind of Indians made this kind of arrowhead?"

"Not Indians. At least not the kind you're thinking about. More like their prehistoric ancestors."

"And it's a spearhead," Maddy said. "Bows and arrows hadn't been invented yet."

"Wow." I ran my finger over the smooth stone. "Old, huh?"

David nodded. "Just how old, well, there's still some pretty hot arguing going on. Well over ten thousand years, though."

"To give you an idea," Mr. Donovan said to me, "that thing was very likely made to hunt mammoths with."

"Wow," I said again. "But you don't really know if it goes with the skeleton, do you?"

They all looked at each other. "Damn," Maddy said. "You're right, Bob, this one's sharp."

"That's right," David told me. "No guarantee the skeleton's from the same time period. Not even safe to guess yet."

"Still nothing on that?" Mr. Donovan asked.

David shrugged. "It's damned old, all right. Just from a superficial examination of the exposed bones, I'm nearly sure there's some degree of fossilization. But so far there's nothing to date it." He sighed. "Best would be the new radiocarbon test, that Dr. Libby's been working on up at the University of Chicago. But half the archaeologists in the country

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are waiting in line for that. Could be a long time before we have an answer."

"But," Maddy said, "now you see why we're excited about this site. It could be really important."

David stood up and stretched. "And so we need to get back to work. Sorry."

He picked up the box and closed it carefully. I saw that there were some numbers marked on the lid. As he carried it back to the trailer Maddy said, "Raymond, it was great meeting you." She reached over and put her hand on my shoulder. "Come back and see us again some time, won't you?"

"Sure." My voice didn't come out quite right. "I will."

But as it turned out I didn't see the Sloanes again for quite a while. I rode down there several times over the next few days, but there was never any sign of them, just the trailer sitting there and the generator running. I guessed they were up at the cave, working, and I thought about going up the hollow and trying to find them, but I didn't know the way.

By now everybody was talking about them. Especially about Maddy. "Parades around practically naked," my Aunt Ethel, who worked at the Ben Franklin five-and-dime store in town, said to Mama. "She was in the store yesterday. Looked like a you-know-what."

Uncle Miles even worked them into his sermon the next Sunday. "I'm reminded," he said, "of the old colored spiritual, 'Them bones, them bones, them dry bones, now hear the word of the Lord.' Some people need to quit worrying about a lot of dry bones and start hearing the word of the Lord."

Next morning I woke up with a head cold. It wasn't all that bad, but it was enough for Mama to keep me in bed for a couple of days and indoors for the rest of the week. I spent the time reading and listening to the radio and mostly being bored and wishing I could go see David and Maddy again.

Daddy came in from town one evening with a big grin on his face. "That schoolteacher of yours," he said to me, "I got to say one thing for him, he's no sissy."

"What happened?" I asked, and Daddy laughed.

"Damnedest thing," he said. "Floyd Haney came up to him in front of the diner, drunk as a skunk as usual, and started cussing him out—still going on about that land across the creek—and when the schoolteacher tried to walk past him, Floyd took a swing at him. Next thing you know Floyd was flat on his ass. I saw the whole thing from across the street."

"Mr. Donovan hit him?"

"Fastest left I ever saw. Deputy Pritchard drove up while Floyd was still laying there, but the schoolteacher said he didn't want to press charges. Probably right," Daddy said. "It never does no good, locking Floyd's kind up. Some folks are just the way they are."

Finally I got to feeling better and Mama let me out of the house again. Naturally I took off right away for the creek.

Mr. Donovan's jeep was sitting there when I came down the hill, and as I stopped the bike I saw they were all three up by the trailer sitting under

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the awning. As I walked toward them I could hear Maddy talking, sounding angry.

"I don't believe this," she was saying. "The most important discovery of the century, and you're acting as if it's a bomb that's going to explode in your face."

"It is," David said. "Oh, sure, maybe not for you. Your tight little rich-bitch ass isn't the one on the line, is it? Nobody pays any attention to graduate students." His voice was getting louder. "I'm the poor son of a bitch with the ink still fresh on his doctorate. If I blow this I'll be lucky to get a job at City College of Rooster Poot, Arkansas."

They looked up and saw me, then, and they got all quiet and embarrassed-looking, the way grown people do when kids catch them quarreling. After a second Maddy said, "Why, hello, Raymond."

I said, "Maybe I ought to go?"

"No, no." Maddy waved her hands. "I bet you'd like a Coke, wouldn't you? Why don't you just go help yourself? The box is just inside the door, you can't miss it."

I went over to the trailer and climbed up the little steps and opened the door. Sure enough, there was a refrigerator, the littlest one I'd ever seen, just inside. I could see up into the front part of the trailer, which was mostly taken up by a bed that needed making. I got myself a Coke and went back out just as Mr. Donovan was saying, "Anyway, I hope these are all right."

I saw now that there was a big yellow envelope on the table and a couple of stacks of big glossy photographs. David was holding a picture up and looking at it from different angles. "Oh, yes," he said, "this is really first-class work. Thanks, Bob."

"Been a while since I've done any darkroom work," Mr. Donovan said. "Took a couple of hours just to dig out my old equipment and get it dusted off. Glad the prints turned out okay."

I walked over and looked at the photos while they talked. One of the ones on top was a close-up shot of a skull, half buried in the ground. Another one looked like a full-length view of the whole skeleton. I picked that one up for a closer look and then I saw something that didn't make any sense at all.

"Hey," I said. "He's wearing clothes!"

They all turned and stared at me. I said, "If the skeleton's as old as you said, wouldn't they have rotted away by now?"

"Oh, shit," David said, and reached over and snatched the picture out of my hand. "Bob, why'd you have to bring—"

"Shut up, David," Maddy said. "Raymond, come here."

I walked around the table and stood in front of her. She took both my hands in hers and looked right into my face. "Raymond," she said, "you wouldn't do anything to hurt us, would you?"

"No, ma'am," I said. My throat had tightened up till I could barely talk. "No, Maddy."

"And if you knew something that could cause trouble for us, you wouldn't tell? I don't mean anything bad or illegal," she said quickly. "Just something that could make a lot of trouble."

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"No." I didn't know what she was talking about but I would have agreed with anything she said.

"Then come on," she said, standing up and picking up a big battery lantern that was sitting on the table. "There's something I want to show you."

David stood up too, fast. "You will like hell!"

"Don't be stupid, David," Maddy said without looking at him. "And for once in your life try trusting someone."

"Raymond's a smart boy," Mr. Donovan said. "He'll cooperate, once he understands."

"Oh, all right," David said, throwing up his hands, "why not? Hell, let's hold a press conference. Call the White House, invite Truman for a look. Bring in the damn United *Nations*."

"Watch your step," Maddy said as we started across the dry creek bed.

It was a long hard walk up the hollow to the cave, and hot even in the deep shade under the trees. By the time we got there, I was wishing I'd brought the rest of that Coke along.

About halfway up the hollow Maddy turned left and started up a steep slope, covered with big loose rocks, to the foot of the bluff. "Here," she said, and I saw what Sheriff Cowan had meant. If I hadn't known there was a cave there I'd never have guessed.

"It's a little rough getting through the brush," she said, "but we didn't want to advertise the location by clearing it away."

She walked around to the side of a gray boulder, big as a good-sized car, that rested against the face of the bluff. She switched on the battery lantern and pushed aside some bushes and disappeared behind the boulder.

"You know," Mr. Donovan said as we started after her, "I believe this must have been sealed off until recently. Look at all that loose rock and earth down below. There's been a slide, not too long ago. Maybe that last big rainstorm in May set it off."

"You could be right," David said. "There's hardly any animal sign in the cave."

I pushed through the brush and found myself in a narrow little space, dark except for the light that was coming from off to my right. "You'll have to get down and crawl a little way," Maddy called back. "It's not too bad."

It was as far as I was concerned. The light from up ahead helped, but it was still a scary place, and going through the tightest part I could feel the whole world pressing in on me. The air was cold, too, with a creepy dead smell. I wanted to yell but I choked it down because I didn't want Maddy to think I was a coward. Then the hole got bigger and the light got brighter and there I was in the cave.

"Sorry about the light," Maddy said as I straightened up. "We usually use carbide lamps, which are brighter. But they're a pain to get started and I don't feel like fooling with it."

It wasn't a fancy cave like the ones in the books, with stalactites and all. It was just a kind of room, about the size of a one-car garage. It looked

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even smaller because of all the stuff stacked and piled over by the walls—shovels and trowels, big round screen-wire dirt sifters, boxes and bags and a lot of things I didn't recognize.

In the middle of the floor, a space had been marked off with wooden pegs and lengths of twine. Inside that, the ground had been dug or scraped down for a foot or so, and in the dug-out space lay the skeleton.

It didn't look much like the ones in the Halloween decorations. It looked more like a bundle of loose sticks, till you got a good look. It lay on its left side with its knees drawn up part way, and its left arm flung out straight. The right hand was out of sight up near its chest.

And sure enough, it was wearing clothes, and they didn't look like Indian clothes to me. It was hard to be sure, but it looked more like some kind of one-piece outfit, like the coveralls my cousin Larry wore when he worked at the Texaco station in town. Maddy held the light up higher and now I saw it had on shoes, too. Or rather boots, with big heavy-looking soles. Actually, I could only see one, because the left foot was still buried.

After a minute I said, "I don't get it."

David said, "Welcome to the club, kid."

"Don't feel bad," Maddy said. "Neither does anyone else."

David went around and squatted down by the hole and reached down and touched the right sleeve. "You asked a good question, back there," he said. "Fabric should have rotted away a long time ago, but just look at this stuff. Oh, it's deteriorated badly, it's brittle and flimsy, but it's still in a hell of a lot better condition than it should be. Than it *can* be."

"But then," I said, thinking I got it now, "it must not be as old as you thought. Must be, uh, modern."

David nodded. "That would be the logical conclusion. The condition of the bones, the partial fossilization, well, there might be some other explanation, chemicals in the soil or something. The Clovis point you saw could have been here long before this guy arrived. But there's just one other thing."

He moved a little to one side and motioned to me. "Come look at this."

I went over and hunkered down beside him, though I didn't really want to get any closer to that skeleton. He said, "Hold that light closer, Maddy. Look here, Raymond."

He was pointing at a big long rip in the material covering the right shoulder. He pushed the cloth aside with his fingertips. "See that?"

I saw it. I'd seen one like it a couple of weeks ago, lying on a bed of cotton in a little box on the table by the creek.

"And so," David said, "what we have here is a man in modern clothes with a ten-thousand-year-old Clovis point embedded in his shoulder. Which, of course, is flatly impossible."

"Modern is right," Maddy said. "I cut a tiny little piece from the cuff and studied it under the microscope, and it's not any natural fiber. In fact it's not exactly woven fiber at all, it's more—I don't know what the hell it is, that's the truth, I've never seen anything like it and textiles are a specialty of mine."

"The boots are synthetic too," David said. "And the fasteners are some kind of hard plastic."

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I thought it over for a minute. "But that's—" I remembered, then, a story in a science fiction magazine I'd had, before Daddy took it away from me and told me he'd whip me if he ever caught me reading that crap again.

I said, "You think he was a time traveler."

"Did I say that?" David made a big show of looking around. "I didn't hear anybody say that, did you?"

"Now you see," Maddy said, "why we're having to keep this secret for now. David's got to be careful how he handles this, because a lot of people are sure to call it a fake. It could destroy his career."

There was something sticking out of the ground just behind the skeleton's lower back, a dark object about the size of a kid's book satchel. Or that was my guess, though you really couldn't see much of it. I said, "What's this?"

"Once again," David said, "I'm damned if I know. Looks like some kind of pack he was carrying, but what's in it I couldn't tell you. Maybe his lunch, maybe his spare socks, maybe something we wouldn't even recognize."

"Like," Maddy said, "whatever got him here. From wherever—whenever—he came from."

"I didn't hear that either," David said. "Anyway, I haven't looked inside and I'm not going to. Not even going to dig it out so it *can* be opened. If and when it gets opened, it's going to be by somebody of absolutely impeccable professional standing, with a bunch of other respected paragons on hand for witnesses."

"Have you got anyone yet?" Mr. Donovan asked.

David shook his head. "Everybody's out on digs right now. Most of all I want Dr. Hoban of the University of Pennsylvania, but he's in Iraq for the rest of the summer."

"That old bastard," Maddy said. "You know damn well he'll steal all the credit for himself."

"I wish I had your optimism," David said. "More likely he'll denounce the whole thing as a fraud and me as a lunatic or worse."

"Of course," Mr. Donovan said, "if the government gets wind of this, and somebody thinks there might be something in that pack with possible military applications—"

"Oh, my God," David said. He put his hands up to his face. "I hadn't even thought of that. Marvelous."

I was looking at the skull. It wasn't "grinning," as they say. The jaws were open and it look like it was screaming in pain. I shivered. It really was cold in there.

I said, "It was the spear that killed him, wasn't it?"

"Looks that way," Maddy said. "Looks as if he dragged himself in here—maybe for shelter, maybe trying to hide—and simply bled to death. That's got to have been a terrible wound."

"Wonder what happened," Mr. Donovan said. "To cause them to kill him, I mean."

"Maybe he broke some local taboo," Maddy said. "We found a few small objects, that apparently fell out of his pockets—another point like that

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one you saw, a bone scraping tool, a kind of awl made from deer horn. Evidently he was doing some collecting. Maybe he picked up something he shouldn't."

"Or maybe they just killed him because he was a stranger." David looked down at the skeleton. "Poor bastard, you sure wound up a long way from home, didn't you?"

"How'd he get buried?" I asked.

"Flooding," Maddy said. "Silt and sand washing in. This cave's been flooded several times in the distant past."

"The floor of the hollow would have been a lot higher back then," Mr. Donovan added. "Say, that's another possible dating clue, isn't it?"

"Maybe." David shrugged. "When you get right down to it, the date doesn't really matter now. If this burial is even a hundred years old, we're looking at the impossible. Christ, *fifty*."

He stood up. "Come on. Raymond's seen enough. Probably wondering by now if we're crazy or he is."

By the time I got home it was nearly supper time. Daddy came in a little bit later, while I was sitting on the couch in the living room trying to think, and right away he said, "Raymond, you been hanging around with them college people, down at the creek? Don't lie to me," he added before I could answer. "Two different people said they saw you on your bicycle headed that way."

I said, "Tobe Nelson said it was all right, Daddy. I asked him and he said it was all right, long as I close the gate."

"That's *Mister* Nelson to you," Mama said from the doorway.

Daddy said, "I don't care if General MacArthur told you it was all right for you to go down there. I'm the one says what you can and can't do, and I'm telling you to stay away from them people. I don't want you having nothing to do with them and I don't want you going down there as long as they're there."

I said, "Why?"

"Because I say so," he said, starting to get red in the face, "and you're not so big I can't still whip your ass if you don't mind me." I started to speak and he said, "Or I can do it right now if you keep talking back."

So I didn't say any more. I wasn't really afraid of him—he hadn't laid a hand on me since I was six, he just liked to talk tough—but I knew he'd get all mad and stomp and holler around, and Mama would start crying, and I didn't feel like going through all that right now. I had enough on my mind.

I did stay away, though, for the next couple of days. I figured David and Maddy didn't need me coming around, with all they had to do and think about.

Wednesday, I decided to go into town to the library and see if they had some books about archaeology. I told Mama where I was going and she said, "You're not going down to the creek, are you, to see those people? You know what your daddy said."

"Just to the library," I said. "Promise."

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"You be careful, then," she said. "I don't really like you riding that thing down the road."

It was only a couple of miles into town, but the weather was still hot, so by the time I got there I was pretty sweaty. Going by the Texaco station I slowed down, thinking about getting me a cold drink, and then I saw the red Mercury parked out front.

David Sloane came out of the side door as I pulled up. "Raymond," he said, raising a hand. He looked at my bike and said, "Hm. You get around pretty well on that bike, don't you? Wonder if you'd consider doing me a big favor."

He got out his wallet. "Five bucks," he said, "if you'll go tell Maddy that I'm stuck in town with car trouble, and I'll probably be coming in pretty late."

I hesitated for a second. Daddy would be really mad if I went down there again. I was taking a big enough chance just standing here talking to David.

But I was too embarrassed to tell David about Daddy, and I really did want to see Maddy again. And if it came down to it, I could say I was doing a Christian duty by helping someone. There wouldn't be much Daddy could say to that.

Besides, there was a lot I could do with five dollars. I said, "Sure," and took the five and stuck it in my pocket and off I went, back up the road, standing on the pedals to get up speed.

When I got down to the creek things looked funny, somehow, and then I realized it was because I was used to seeing the red car sitting there by the trailer. Mr. Donovan's jeep was there, though. Good, I thought, maybe he'd give me a ride back to town.

But I didn't see him or Maddy anywhere, so I figured they must be up at the cave. I leaned the bike on its stand and started toward the creek, but then I stopped and looked back at the trailer. I really was dry from riding in the hot sun, and I knew Maddy wouldn't mind if I got myself a nice cold Coke first.

The generator motor was rattling away as I walked toward the trailer. I went up the little metal steps and saw that the door wasn't quite shut. I pushed it open and started to go in, but then I caught something moving out of the corner of my eye and I turned my head and saw them on the bed.

Mr. Donovan was lying on top of Maddy. Her legs were sticking up in the air and they were both sort of thrashing around. Neither of them had any clothes on.

I stood there for a minute or so, standing on the top step with my head and shoulders inside the door, just staring with my mouth open. They didn't look around. I don't think they were noticing much just then.

Finally I got myself unstuck and jumped down off the steps and ran, up the creek bank, not really looking where I was going, just getting away from that trailer. I felt sick and angry and ashamed and yet kind of excited too. My skin felt hot and not just from the sun.

I mean, I knew about what they were doing. I was thirteen, after all. But it just didn't look at *all* like I'd imagined.

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I got my bike and wobbled off up the road, nearly falling a couple of times. At the top of the hill I remembered David's message, and the five dollars. So now he was going to think I'd cheated him, but I couldn't help that. I wouldn't have gone back down there for all the money in the United States.

Saturday night I woke up in the middle of a dream about Maddy and the skeleton—I don't want to tell about it, it was pretty awful—and sat up in bed, listening, the way you do when you don't know what woke you. It seemed like I could hear the echo of a big loud boom, and then a rumbling sound dying away. In the next room, Mama's voice said, "What was that?"

"Thunder," Daddy said. "Go back to sleep."

Next morning as we left for church I saw a lot of dust hanging over the road across Tobe Nelson's pasture, and what looked like a police car heading toward the creek. The dust was still there when we came home, but I didn't see any more cars.

Late in the afternoon while we were sitting on the porch Sheriff Cowan came by. "Afternoon," he said to Daddy. "Wonder if I could ask your boy a couple of questions. Don't worry, he's not in any trouble," he added, smiling at Mama.

Daddy said, "Raymond, answer the sheriff's questions."

Sheriff Cowan sat down on the edge of the porch and looked up at me. "I understand you've been spending a lot of time down by the creek lately. Been friendly with those friends of Mr. Donovan's?"

"He was," Daddy said, not giving me a chance to answer. "That's over."

"That right?" Sheriff Cowan raised one eyebrow. "Well, then I'm probably wasting my time. You haven't been down there in the last couple of days?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Oh, well." He let out a big loud sigh. "So much for that. Sorry to bother you folks."

Daddy said, "Mind if I ask what this is about?"

Sheriff Cowan turned his head and looked off across the valley. "Night before last, somebody broke into Huckaby's Feed and Supply and stole half a case of dynamite. Last night they used it to blow up that cave."

I said, "*What?*" and Mama made little astonished noises. Daddy said, "Well, I'll be damned."

Sheriff Cowan nodded. "Yep, did a pretty thorough job, too. The whole bluff's all busted up and caved in, great big chunks of rock every which way."

He took off his hat and scratched his head. "Tell you the truth, I can't hardly believe somebody did that much damage with half a case of DuPont stump-blower. It's strange," he said. "Tobe Nelson claimed there were two explosions, too, a little one and then a big one, but nobody else heard it that way." He shrugged. "Maybe some kind of gas in the ground there? Who knows?"

Mama said, "My Lord. Who would do such a thing?"

"Oh," Sheriff Cowan said, "there's no doubt in my mind who did it. But I don't expect I'll ever prove it."

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Daddy said, "Floyd Haney."

"Yep. Nobody else around here that crazy and mean," Sheriff Cowan said. "And he was sure nursing a grudge about that land."

He stood up and put his hat back on. "But like I say, I'll never prove it. I thought maybe Raymond might have seen or heard something, but I should have known that was too much to hope for."

He chuckled down deep in his throat. "You know the funny part? He had all that work and risk for nothing. Those two scientists already pulled out."

"They're gone?" I said, louder than I meant to.

"Yep," Sheriff Cowan said. "Drove right through town, late yesterday afternoon, pulling that trailer. So they must have found out there wasn't anything important there after all. Probably just some old animal bones or something."

"Probably," Daddy said. "Bunch of foolishness."

And that's about all there is to tell. David and Maddy never came back, and nobody else ever tried to find that cave again. Not that it would have done them any good. I went up into Moonshine Hollow once, a long time later, and the whole place was smashed up so bad you couldn't even tell where you were.

Mr. Donovan left too, that summer. He went back into the Marines and I heard he got killed in Korea, but I don't really know.

Wendell's daddy got caught with a stolen truck, later on that year, and got sent off to the penitentiary, where everybody said he belonged. Sheriff Cowan never did charge him with blowing up the cave, but he didn't make any secret of believing he did it.

And maybe he was right, but I wasn't so sure. My cousin Larry was working the evening shift at the Texaco station when David and Maddy stopped for gas on their way out of town, and he said Maddy was crying and it looked like she'd been roughed up some. And Aunt Ethel mentioned to Mama that David had been in the store on Saturday buying an alarm clock. But I never said anything to anybody.

People talked, for a while there, about that strange business in Moonshine Hollow. But it didn't last long. Everybody's mind was on the news from Korea, which was mostly bad, and then by next year all anybody wanted to talk about was the election. I guess by now I'm the only one who even remembers.

And sometimes I sure wish I didn't. ○

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—James Patrick Kelly

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THE MADWOMAN OF SHUTTLEFIELD

Allen M. Steele

"The Madwoman of Shuttlefield" is the first story in a new series of the author's popular "Coyote" stories. The novel-length version of the first set of tales, entitled *Coyote*, garnered glowing reviews from The New York *Times* and elsewhere when it was released by Ace in hardcover last December.

On the first night Allegra DiSilvio spent on Coyote, she met the mad woman of Shuttlefield. It seemed like an accident at the time, but in the weeks and months to follow she'd come to realize that it was much more, that their fates were linked by forces beyond their control.

The shuttle from the *Long Journey* touched down in a broad meadow just outside the town of Liberty. The high grass had been cleared from the landing pad, burned by controlled fires to create a flat expanse nearly a half-mile in diameter, upon which the gull-winged spacecraft settled after making its long fall from orbit. As she descended the gangway ramp and walked out from beneath the hull, Allegra looked up to catch her first sight of Bear: a giant blue planet encircled by silver rings, hovering in an azure sky. The air was fresh, scented with midsummer sourgrass; a warm breeze caressed the dark stubble of her shaved scalp, and it was in this moment that she knew that she'd made it. The journey was over; she was on Coyote.

Dropping the single bag she had been allowed to take with her from Earth, Allegra fell to her hands and knees and wept.

Eight months of waiting to hear whether she'd won the lottery, two more months of nervous anticipation before she was assigned a berth aboard the next starship to 47 Ursae Majoris, a week of sitting in Texas before taking the ride to the Union Astronautica spaceport on Matagorda Island, three days spent traveling to lunar orbit where she boarded the *Long Journey* . . . and then, forty-eight years in dreamless biostasis, to wake up cold, naked, and bald, forty-six light-years from everything familiar, with everyone she had ever known either long-dead or irrevocably out of her reach.

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She was so happy, she could cry. *Thank you, God,* she thought. *Thank you, thank you . . . I'm here, and I'm free, and the worst is over.*

She had no idea just how wrong she was. And it wasn't until after she'd made friends with a crazy old lady that she'd thank anyone again.

Liberty was the first colony on Coyote, established by the crew of the URSS *Alabama* in A.D. 2300, or C.Y. 01 by LeMarean calendar. It was now 2306 on Coyote by Gregorian reckoning, though, and the original colonists had long-since abandoned their settlement, disappearing into the wilderness just days after the arrival of WHSS *Seeking Glorious Destiny Among the Stars for the Greater Good of Social Collectivism,* the next ship from Earth. No one knew why they'd fled—or at least those who knew weren't saying—but the fact remained that Liberty was built to house only a hundred people. *Glorious Destiny* brought a thousand people to the new world, and the third ship—*Traveling Forth to Spread Social Collectivism to New Frontiers*—had brought a thousand more, and so by the time the *Long Journey to the Galaxy in the Spirit of Social Collectivism* reached Coyote, the population of New Florida had swelled to drastic proportions.

The log cabins erected by the first settlers were now occupied by Union Astronautica officers from *Glorious Destiny* and *New Frontiers*. It hadn't been long before every tree within ten miles had been cut down for the construction of new houses, with roads expanding outward into what had once been marshes. Once the last stands of blackwood and faux-birch were gone, most of the wildlife moved away; the swoops and creek cats that once preyed upon livestock were seldom seen any more, and with automatic guns placed around the colony's perimeter only rarely did anyone hear the nocturnal screams of boids. Yet still there wasn't enough timber to build homes for everyone.

Newcomers were expected to fend for themselves. In the spirit of social collectivism, aid was given in the form of temporary shelter and two meals a day, but after that it was every man and woman for himself. The Union Astronautica guaranteed free passage to Coyote for those who won the public lottery, but stopped short of promising anything once they'd arrived. Collectivist theory held that a sane society was one in which everyone reaped the rewards of individual efforts, but Liberty was still very much a frontier town, and anyone asking for room and board in the homes owned by those who'd come earlier were likely to receive a cold stare in return. All men were created equal, yet some were clearly more equal than others.

And so, once she'd picked herself up from the ground, Allegra found herself taking up residence not in Liberty, where she thought she'd be living, but in Shuttlefield, the sprawling encampment surrounding the landing pad. She made her way to a small bamboo hut with a cloverweed-thatched roof where she stood in line for an hour before she was issued a small tent that had been patched many times by those who'd used it earlier, a soiled sleeping bag that smelled of mildew, and a ration card that entitled her to eat in what had once been Liberty's grange hall before it was made into the community center. The bored Union Guard soldier behind the counter told her that she could pitch her tent wherever she

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wanted, then hinted that he'd be happy to share his cabin if she'd sleep with him. She refused, and he impatiently cocked his thumb toward the door before turning to the next person in line.

Shuttlefield was a slum; there was no other way to describe it. Row upon row of tents, arranged in untidy ranks along muddy footpaths trampled by countless feet, littered with trash and cratered by potholes. The industrious had erected shelter from bamboo grown from seeds brought from Earth; others lived out of old cargo containers into which they had cut doors and windows. Dirty children chased starving dogs between clotheslines draped with what looked like rags until Allegra realized that they were garments; the smoke from cook fires was rank with odor of compost. Two faux-birch shacks, side by side, had handwritten signs for Men and Women above their doors; the stench of urine and feces lay thick around them, yet it didn't stop people from pitching tents nearby. The voices she heard were mostly Anglo, but her ears also picked up other tongues—Spanish, Russian, German, various Arab and Asian dialects—all mixed together in a constant background hum.

And everywhere, everyone seemed to be selling something, from kiosks in front of their shelters. Plucked carcasses of chickens dangled upside-down from twine suspended between poles. Shirts, jackets, and trousers stitched from some hide she'd never seen before—she'd later learn that it was swamper fur—were laid out on rickety tables. Jars of spices and preserved vegetables stood next to the pickled remains of creatures she'd never heard of. Obsolete pads containing data and entertainment from Earth, their sellers promising that their power cells were still fresh, their memories virus-clean. A captive swamper in a wooden cage, laying on its side and nursing a half-dozen babies; raise the pups until they're half-grown, their owner said, then kill the mother and in-breed her offspring for their pelts: a great business opportunity.

A small man with a furtive look in his eyes sidled up to Allegra, glanced both ways, then offered her a small plastic vial half-filled with an oily clear liquid. Sting, he confided. Pseudo-wasp venom. Just put a drop or two on your tongue, and you'll think you're back home. . . .

Allegra shook her head and kept walking, her back aching from the duffel bag carried over her shoulder and the folded tent beneath her arm. Home? This was home now. There was nothing on Earth for her to go back to, even if she could return.

She found a bare spot of ground amid several shanties, yet no sooner had she put down her belongings when a man emerged from the nearest shack. He asked if she was a member of the Cutters Guild; when she professed ignorance, he gruffly told her that this was Guild territory. Reluctant to get in a quarrel, Allegra obediently picked up her stuff and went farther down the street until she spotted another vacant place, this time among a cluster of tents much like her own. She was beginning to erect the poles when two older women came over to her site; without explanation, one knocked over her poles while the other grabbed her bag and threw it in the street. When Allegra resisted, the first woman angrily knocked her to the ground. This was New Frontiers turf; who did she think she was, trying to squat here? A small crowd had gathered to

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watch; seeing that no one was going to take her side, Allegra quickly gathered her things and hurried away.

For the next several hours, she wandered the streets of Shuttlefield, searching for some place to put up her tent, yet every time she found a likely looking spot—and after the second incident, she was careful to ask permission from the nearest neighbor—she discovered that it had already been claimed by one group or another. It soon became clear that Shuttlefield was dominated by a hierarchy of guilds, groups, and clubs, ranging from societies that had originated among the passengers of earlier ships to gangs of hard-eyed men who guarded their territory with machetes. A couple of times Allegra was informed that she was welcome to stay, but only so long as she agreed to pay a weekly tax, usually one-third of what she earned from whatever job she eventually found or, failing that, one meal out of three from her ration card. A large, comfortable-looking shack occupied by single women of various ages turned out to be the local brothel; if she stayed here, the madam told her, she'd be expected to pay the rent on her back. At least she was polite about it; Allegra replied that she'd keep her offer in mind, but they both knew that this was an option only if she were desperate.

It was dusk, and she was footsore, hungry and on the verge of giving up, when Allegra found herself at the edge of town. It was close to a swamp—the sourgrass grew chest-high here, and not far away was a cluster of the ball-plants she'd been warned to avoid—and there was only one other dwelling, a slope-roofed and windowless shack nailed together from discarded pieces of faux-birch. Potted plants hung from the roof eaves above the front door, and smoke rose from a chimney hole, yet there was no one in sight. Coming closer, Allegra heard the clucking of chickens from a wire-fenced pen out back; it also seemed as if she heard singing, a low and discordant voice from within the shack.

Allegra hesitated. This lonesome hovel away from all the others, so close to the swamp where who-knew-what might lurk, made her nervous. Yet darkness was settling upon town, and she knew she couldn't go any further. So she picked a spot of ground about ten yards from the shack and quietly went about pitching her tent. If someone protested, she'd just have to negotiate a temporary arrangement; she'd gladly trade a couple of meals for a night of sleep.

Yet no one bothered her as she erected her shelter, and although the voice stopped singing and even the chickens went quiet after awhile, no one objected to her presence. The sun was down by the time she was finished, and dark clouds shrouded the giant planet high above her. It looked like rain, so she crawled into the tent, dragging her belongings behind her.

Once she had laid out her sleeping bag, Allegra unzipped her duffel bag and dug through it until she found the lightstick she'd had been given before she left the *Long Journey*. The night was cool, so she found a sweater and pulled it on. There were a couple of food bars in the bottom of the bag; she unwrapped one. Although she was tempted to eat the other, she knew she'd want it in the morning. The way things were going, there was no telling what she'd have to suffer through before she got a decent meal. It

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was already evident that Shuttlefield had its own way of doing things, and the system was rigged to prevent newcomers from taking advantage of them.

Yet she was free. That counted for something. She had escaped Earth, and now she was . . .

A shuffling sound from outside.

Allegra froze, then slowly raised her eyes.

She had left the tent flap partially unzipped at the top. In the sallow glow of her lightstick, she saw someone peering in through the insectnetting: a woman's face, deeply lined, framed by lank hair that may have once been blond before it turned ash-grey.

They silently regarded each other as the first drops of night rain began tapping at the tent's plastic roof. The woman's eyes were blue, Allegra observed, yet they seemed much darker, as if something had leached all the color from her irises, leaving only an afterimage of blue.

"Why are you here?" the woman asked.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," Allegra said. "I didn't mean to. . . ."

"Sorry for what?" The eyes grew sharper, yet the voice was hollow. Like her face, it was neither young nor old. She spoke English rather than Anglo; that caught Allegra by surprise, and she had to take a moment to mentally translate the older dialect.

"Sorry for trespassing," she replied, carefully speaking the English she'd learned in school. "I was . . ."

"Trespassing where?" Not a question. A demand.

"Here . . . your place. I know it's probably not . . ."

"My place?" A hint of a smile which quickly disappeared, replaced by the dark scowl. "Yes, this is my place. The Eastern Divide, the Equatorial River, Midland, the Meridian Sea, all the places he sailed . . . those are Rigil Kent's places. My son lives in Liberty, but he never comes to see me. No one in Shuttlefield but thieves and scum. But here. . . ." Again, the fleeting smile. "Everything is mine. The chickens, the stars, and everything in between. Who are you? And why are you here?"

The rush of words caught her unprepared; Allegra understood only the last part. "Allegra DiSilvio," she said. "I've just arrived from the . . ."

"Did Rigil Kent send you?" More insistently now.

In a flash of insight that she'd come to realize was fortunate, Allegra didn't ask who she meant. What was important was her response. "No," she said, "he didn't send me. I'm on my own."

The woman stared at her. The rain was falling harder now; somewhere in the distance, she heard the rumble of thunder. Water spilled through a leak in the tent, spattered across her sleeping bag. Yet still the woman's eyes didn't stray from her own, even though the rain was matting her grey hair. Finally, she spoke:

"You may stay."

Allegra let out her breath. "Thank you. I promise I won't. . . ."

The face vanished. Allegra heard footsteps receding. A door creaked open, slammed shut. Chickens cackled briefly, then abruptly went quiet, as if cowed into silence.

Allegra waited a few seconds, then hastily closed the tent flap. She used

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the discarded food wrapper to plug the leak, then removed her boots and pushed herself into her sleeping bag, reluctant to take off her clothes even though they were filthy. She fell asleep while the summer storm raged around her. She hadn't turned off the light even though common sense dictated that she needed to preserve the chemical battery.

She was safe. Yet for the first time since she'd arrived, she was truly frightened.

The next morning, though, Allegra saw her neighbor just once, and then only briefly. She awoke to hear the chickens clucking, and crawled out of her tent to see the woman standing in the pen behind her house, throwing corn from an apron tied around her waist. When Allegra called to her, though, she turned and walked back into her house, slamming the door shut behind her. Allegra considered going over and knocking, but decided against it; she clearly wanted to be left alone, and Allegra might be pushing her luck by intruding on her privacy.

So she changed clothes, wrapped a scarf around her bare scalp, and left to make the long hike into Liberty. She did so reluctantly; although there were no other tents nearby, she didn't know for certain that she wasn't camped on some group's turf. Yet her stomach was growling, and she didn't want to consume her last food bar unless necessary. And somehow, she had a feeling that people tended to leave her strange neighbor alone.

The road to Liberty was littered with trash: discarded wrappers, broken bottles, empty cans, bits and pieces of this and that. If Shuttlefield's residents made any effort to landfill or recycle their garbage, it wasn't evident. She passed farm fields where men and women worked on their hands and knees, pulling cloverweed from between rows of crops planted earlier in the summer. Coyote's seasons were three times as long as they were on Earth—ninety-one or ninety-two days in each month, twelve months in a year by the LeMarean calendar. Still, it was the near the end of Hamaliel, the second month of summer; the farmers would be working hard to pull in the midseason harvest so that they could plant again before autumn. The original colonists had struggled to keep themselves fed through the first long winter they'd faced on Coyote, and they only had a hundred or so mouths to feed.

The distant roar of engines drew her attention; looking up, she saw a shuttle descending upon the landing pad. More passengers from the *Long Journey* being ferried down to Coyote; now that a new ship from Earth had arrived, the population of New Florida would increase by another thousand people. Social collectivism may have worked well in the Western Hemisphere Union, built upon the smoldering remains of the United Republic of America, but there it benefited from established cities and high-tech infrastructure. Coyote was still largely unexplored; what little technology had been brought from Earth was irreplaceable, unavailable to the average person, so the colonists had to live off the land as best they could. Judging from what she'd already seen in Shuttlefield, utopian political theory had broken down; too many people had come here too quickly, forcing the newcomers to fend for themselves in a feudal hierarchy in which the weak were at the mercy of the strong, and everyone was under the

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iron heel of the colonial government. Unless she wanted to either become a prostitute or live out the rest of her life as a serf, she'd better find a way to survive.

Allegra came upon a marsh where Japanese bamboo was grown. The most recent crop had already been harvested, their stumps extending for a hundred acres or so, the ground littered with broken shoots. On impulse, she left the path and waded out into the marsh, where she searched the ground until she found a foot-long stalk that was relatively undamaged. Tucking it beneath her arm, she returned to the road.

This would do for a start. Now all she needed was a sharp knife.

Liberty was much different than Shuttlefield. The streets were wide and clean, recently paved with gravel, lined on either side by log cabins. There were no hustlers, no kiosks; near the village center, she found small shops, their wares displayed behind glass windows. Yet everyone she passed refused to look her way, save for Proctors in blue uniforms who eyed her with suspicion. When she paused before the open half-door of a glassblower's shop to watch the men inside thrust white-hot rods into the furnace, a blue-shirt walked over to tap her on the shoulder, shake his head, and point the way to the community hall. Few words were spoken, yet the message was clear; she was only allowed to pass through on her way to the community hall, and not linger where she didn't belong.

Breakfast was a lukewarm porridge containing potatoes and chunks of fishmeat; it resembled clam chowder, but tasted like sour milk. The old man who ladled it out in the serving line told her that it was creek crab stew, and she should eat up—it was only a day old. When Allegra asked what was on the menu for dinner, he grinned as he added a slice of stale bread to her plate. More of the same . . . and by then it'd be a day-and-a-half old.

She found a place at one of the long wooden tables that ran down the length of the community hall, and tried not to meet the gaze of any of the others seated nearby even though she recognized several from the *Long Journey*. She'd made friends with no one during her passage from Earth, and wasn't in a hurry to do so now, so she distracted herself by studying an old mural painted on the wall. Rendered in native dyes by an untrained yet talented hand, it depicted the URSS *Alabama* in orbit above Coyote. Apparently an artifact left behind by Liberty's original residents before they'd fled. No one knew where they'd gone, although it was believed that they had started another colony somewhere on Midland, across the East Channel from New Florida.

Allegra was wondering how hard it might be to seek them out when she heard a mechanical sound behind her: servomotors shifting gears, the thin whine of an electrical power source. Then a filtered burr of a voice, addressing her in Anglo:

"Pardon me, but are you Allegra DiSilvio?"

She looked up to see a silver skull peering at her from within a black cowl, her face dully reflected in its ruby eyes. A Savant: a posthuman who had once been flesh and blood until he'd relinquished his humanity to have his mind downloaded into cyborg form, becoming an immortal intel-

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lect. Allegra detested them. Savants operated the starships, but it was surprising to find one here and now. And worse, it had come looking for her.

"That's me." She put down her spoon. "Who're you?"

"Manuel Castro. Lieutenant Governor of the New Florida Colony." A claw-like hand rose from the folds of its dark cloak. "Please don't get up. I only meant to introduce myself."

Allegra made no effort to rise. "Pleased to meet you, Savant Castro. Now if you'll excuse me. . . ."

"Oh, now . . . no reason to be rude. I merely wish to welcome you to Coyote, make sure that all your needs are being met."

"Really? Well, then, you could start by giving me a place to stay. A house here in town would be fine . . . one room will do. And some fresh clothing . . . I've only got one other change."

"Unfortunately, there are no vacancies in Liberty. If you'd like, I can add your name to the waiting list, and notify you if something opens up. As for clothing, I'm afraid you'll have to continue wearing what you've brought until you've tallied enough hours in public service to exchange them for new clothes. However, I have a list of work details that are looking for new employees."

"Thanks, but I'll . . ." A new thought occurred to her. "Are there any openings here? I think I could give a hand in the kitchen, if they need some assistance."

"Just a moment." Castro paused for a moment, his quantum-comp brain accessing data from a central AI. "Ah, yes . . . you're in luck. The community kitchen needs a new dishwasher for the morning-to-midday shift. Eight hours per day, starting at 0600 and ending at 1400. No previous experience required. One and a half hours credit per hour served."

"When does it start?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Thank you. I'll take it." She turned back to her meal, yet the Savant made no move to leave. It patiently stood behind her, its body making quiet machine noises. Allegra dipped her spoon into the foul stew, waited for Castro to go away. All around her, the table had gone silent; she felt eyes upon her as others watched and listened.

"From your records, I understand you had a reputation back on Earth," Castro said. "You were known as a musician."

"Not exactly. I was a composer. I didn't perform." Looking straight ahead, she refused to meet his fathomless glass eyes.

Another pause. "Ah, yes . . . so I see. You wrote music for the Connecticut River Ensemble. In fact, I think I have one of your works. . . ."

From its mouth grill, a familiar melody emerged: "Sunrise on Holyoke," a minuet for string quartet. She'd written it early one winter morning when she'd lived in the foothills of the Berkshires, trying to capture the feeling of the dawn light over the Holyoke range. A delicate and ethereal piece, reconstructed in electronic tonalities by something that had given up all pretense of humanity.

"Yes, that's mine. Thank you very much for reminding me." She glanced over her shoulder. "My stew's getting cold. If you don't mind. . . ."

The music abruptly ended. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I can't give it justice." A

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moment passed. "If you're ever inclined to compose again, we would be glad to have you do so. We often lack for culture here."

"Thank you. I'll consider it."

She waited, staring determinedly into her soup bowl. After a few moments, she heard the rustle of its cloak, the subdued whir and click of its legs as it walked away. There was quiet around her, like the brief silence that falls between movements of a symphony, then murmured voices slowly returned.

For an instant they seemed to fill a void within her, one that she'd fought so long and hard to conquer . . . but then, once more, the music failed to reach her. She heard nothing, saw nothing.

"Hey, lady," someone seated nearby whispered. "You know who that was?"

"Yeah, jeez!" another person murmured. "Manny Castro! No one ever stood up to him like that. . . ."

"Who did you say you were? I didn't catch . . ."

"Excuse me." The plate and bowl rattled softly in her hands as she stood up. She carried it to a wooden cart, where she placed it with a clatter which sounded all too loud for her ears. Remembering the bamboo stalk she'd left on the table, she went back to retrieve it. Then, ignoring the questioning faces around her, she quickly strode out of the dining hall.

All this distance, only to have the past catch up to her. She began to make the long walk back to Shuttlefield.

When she returned to her tent, she found that it was still there. However, it hadn't gone unnoticed. A Proctor kneeled before the tent, holding the flap open as he peered inside.

"Pardon me," she asked as she came up behind him, "but is there something I can help you with?"

Hearing her, the Proctor turned to look around. A young man with short-cropped blond hair, handsome yet overweight; he couldn't have been much older than twenty Earth years, almost half Allegra's age. He dropped the tent flap and stood up, brushing dirt from his knees.

"Is this yours?" Less a question than a statement. His face seemed oddly familiar, although she was certain she'd never met him before.

"Yes, it's mine. Do you have a problem with that?"

Her attitude took him by surprise; he blinked, stepping back before he caught himself. Perhaps he'd never been challenged in this way. "It wasn't here the last time I stopped by," he said, businesslike but not unkind. "I wanted to know who was setting up here."

"I arrived last night." Allegra glanced toward the nearby shack; her neighbor was nowhere to be seen, yet she observed that the front door was ajar. "Came in yesterday from the *Long Journey,*" she continued, softening her own tone. "I couldn't find another place to stay, so . . ."

"Everyone from the *Long Journey* is being put over there." The young blueshirt turned to point toward the other side of Shuttlefield; as he did, she noticed the chevrons on the right sleeve of his uniform. "Didn't anyone tell you?"

"No one told me anything . . . and now I suppose you want me to move."

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She didn't relish the thought of packing up again and relocating across town. At least here she was closer to Liberty; it would cut her morning hike to work. "I spoke with the lady who lives next door, and she didn't seem to mind if I . . ."

"I know. I've just talked to her." He cast a wary eye upon the shack, and for an instant it seemed as if the door moved a few inches, as if someone behind it was eavesdropping. The Proctor raised a hand to his face. "Can I speak with you in private?" he whispered. "You're not in trouble, I promise. It's just . . . we need to talk."

Mystified, Allegra nodded, and the blueshirt led her around to the other side of the tent. He crouched once more, and she settled down upon her knees. Now they could only see the shack roof; even the chicken pen was hidden from sight.

"My name's Chris," he said quietly as he offered his hand. "Chris Levin . . . I'm the Chief Proctor."

A lot of authority for someone nearly young enough to be her son. "Allegra DiSilvio," she replied, shaking hands with him. "Look, I'm sorry I was so . . ."

"Don't worry about it." Chris evinced a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm sure you've noticed by now, but the lady over there . . . well, she keeps to herself. Doesn't leave the house much."

"I picked up on that."

Chris idly plucked at some grass between his knees. "Her name's Cecelia . . . Cecelia Levin, although everyone calls her Sissy. She's my mother."

Allegra felt the blood rush from her face. She suddenly recalled the old woman having mentioning that she had a son in Liberty. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"You couldn't have. You've just arrived." He shook his head. "Look, my mother is . . . truth is, she's not well. She's very sick, in fact . . . as you may have noticed."

Allegra nodded. His mother stood out in the pouring rain last night and raved about how she owned both her chickens and the stars; yes, that qualified as unusual behavior. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Can't be helped. Mom's been through a lot in the last few years. She. . . ." He broke off. "Long story. In any case, that's why no has set up camp out here. People are afraid of her . . . and to tell the truth, she chases them away. Which is why you're unusual."

"How come?"

Chris raised his eyes, and now she could see that they were much the same as his mother's: blue yet somehow hollow, although not with quite the same degree of darkness. "She let you stay. Believe me, if she didn't like you, your tent wouldn't still be standing. Oh, she might have let you spend the night, but as soon as you left she would have set fire to it. That's what she's done to everyone else who's tried to camp next to her."

Allegra felt a cold chill. She started to rise, but Chris clasped her wrist. "No, no . . . calm down. She's not going to do that. She likes you. She told me so herself."

"She . . . likes me?"

"Uh-huh . . . or at least as much as she likes anyone these days. She believes you're a nice woman who's come to keep her company."

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"She wouldn't even speak to me this morning!"

"She's shy."

"Oh, for the love of. . . !"

"Look," he said, and now there was an edge in his voice, "she wants you to stay, and I want you to stay. No one will bother you out here, and she needs someone to look out for her."

"I . . . I can't do that," Allegra said. "I've just taken a job in Liberty . . . washing dishes at the community hall. I can't afford to. . . ."

"Great. I'm glad you've found work." He paused, and smiled meaningfully. "That won't pay much, though, and by winter this tent of yours will be pretty cold. But I can fix that. Stay here and take care of Mom when you're not working, and you'll have your own cabin . . . with a wood stove and even your own privy. That's better than anyone else from your ship will get. And you'll never have to deal with gangs or turf-tax. Anyone who bothers you spends six months in the stockade, doing hard time on the public works crew. Got me?"

Allegra understood. She was being given the responsibility of looking out for the demented mother of the Chief Proctor. So long as Sissy Levin had company, Allegra DiSilvio would never have to worry about freezing to death in the dark, being shaken down by the local stooges, or being raped in her tent. She would have shelter, protection, and the solitude she craved.

"Got you," she said. "It's a deal."

They shook on it, and then Chris heaved himself to his feet, extending a hand to help her up. "I'll talk to Mom, tell her that you're staying," he said. "Don't rush things. She'll introduce herself to you when she feels like it. But I think you'll make great friends."

"Thanks. We'll work things out." Allegra watched as he turned toward the shack. The door was cracked open; for an instant, she caught a glimpse of her face. "Just one more thing. . . ."

"Yes?" The Chief stopped, looked back at her.

"How long have you been here? I mean . . . which ship did you come in on?"

Chris hesitated. "We've been here three Coyote years," he said. "We came aboard the *Alabama*."

Allegra gaped at him. "I thought all the first-timers had left."

He nodded solemnly. "They did. We're the ones who stayed behind."

"So why. . . ?"

But he was already walking away. That was a question he didn't want to answer.

Time was measured by the length of her hair. A week after Allegra started work at the community kitchen, she had little more than fuzz on top of her head; that was the day she palmed a small paring knife from the sink and took it home. Its absence wasn't noticed, and it gave her the first tool she needed to do her work. By the time her shack was built, she no longer needed to wear a head scarf, and she used a few credits to purchase a brush from the general store in Liberty (where she was now allowed to enter, so long as she bought something). She was beginning to tie back her

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hair in a short ponytail when she finished carving her first flute; a short blade of sourgrass inserted within the bamboo shaft below the mouthpiece served as its reed, and with a little practice she was able to play simple tunes, although not well. Yet it wasn't until late summer, when her chestnut hair had finally reached the shoulder-length she'd worn it on Earth, that she finally had her first real conversation with Sissy Levin.

For many weeks, her reclusive neighbor continued to avoid her; their brief encounter the first night Allegra spent on Coyote was the only time she'd spoken with her. Every morning, just after sunrise when Allegra left to go into Liberty, she spotted Sissy feeding her chickens. She'd wave and call her name— "Good morning, Ms. Levin, how are you?"—and she had little doubt that her voice carried across the short distance between their shacks, yet Sissy never acknowledged her except for the briefest of nods. So Allegra would go to work, and early in the afternoon she'd return to find her nowhere in sight. Every now and then, Allegra would venture over to knock on her door, yet no matter how long or patiently she'd wait outside, Sissy never greeted her.

Nonetheless, there were signs that Sissy was coming to accept her. A few days after a group of men from the Carpenters Guild arrived with a cart full of lumber and spent the afternoon building a one-room shack for Allegra, complete with a wood stove fashioned from a discarded fuel cell, some basic furniture, and a small privy out back ("No charge, lady," the foreman said, "this one's on the Chief") she came home to find a wicker basket of fresh eggs on the front porch. Allegra carefully placed the eggs in the cabinet above the stove, then carried the basket over to Sissy's house. Again, there was no response to her knocks, and finally Allegra gave up and went home, leaving the basket next to her door. A few days later, though, the basket reappeared . . . this time just after sunrise, even before Allegra had awakened.

This pattern continued for awhile. Then one afternoon, Allegra returned home to open the door and discover a dead chicken hanging upside-down from the ceiling. The bird hadn't been feathered or cleaned; it was simply a carcass, its neck broken, its feet tied together with the rough twine with which it had been suspended from a crossbeam. Allegra shrieked when she saw it, and for a moment she thought she heard mad laughter from next door. She didn't know whether it was a gift or a threat, but she wasn't about to ask; she didn't know how to clean the bird, so she took it to the community hall the next morning, and a cook with whom she'd become friendly did it for her. The chicken made for a good lunch and she kept the feathers as stuffing for a pillow, yet Allegra stayed away from Sissy for awhile, and three weeks passed before she found any more eggs on her doorstep.

The first flute Allegra made didn't have a very good sound, so she gathered some more bamboo and started over again, this time experimenting with different kinds of reeds: faux-birch bark, chicken feathers, cloverleaf, whatever else she could find. She'd never fashioned her own instruments before—what little she knew, she'd learned from observing craftsmen back in New England—so it was mainly a matter of trial and error. Eventually, she discovered that swamper skin, cured and tightly stretched, produced the best results. She got it from a glovemaker in Shuttlefield;

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when Sissy began leaving eggs on her doorstep again, Allegra bartered a few for a square foot of skin, with the promise that she wouldn't go into the clothing business herself.

Early one evening she sat out on her front porch, playing the flute she'd most recently fashioned. The sun had gone down, and Bear was rising to the east; she'd carried a fish-oil lamp out onto the porch, and its warm glow cast her shadow across the rough planks of the porch. The night was cool, the air redolent with the scent of approaching autumn. Not far away, she could see bonfires within Shuttlefield. It was the fourth week of Uriel, the last month of Coyote summer; next Zaphiel would be First Landing Day, the colony's biggest holiday. Already the inhabitants were gearing up for the celebration, yet she wanted nothing to do with this. Her only desire was to be left alone, to practice her art in solitude.

The new flute had a good sound: neither too shrill nor too low, and she was able to run up and down the scales without any effort. Now that she knew how to make one, it shouldn't be hard to duplicate others like it. On impulse, she shifted to a piece she'd written for the Connecticut River Ensemble. She was about halfway through the first stanza when a nearby voice began humming the melody, and she turned to see Sissy Levin standing next to her.

Allegra was so startled, she nearly dropped the flute. Sissy didn't notice. She leaned against the awning post, her eyes closed, a soft smile upon her face. In the wan light of lamp, Allegra could now clearly see the deep wrinkles around her mouth, the crows-feet at the corners of her eyes; as always, her hair was an uncombed mass that formed a ragged halo around her head. Even so, at this moment she seemed at peace.

Her fingers trembling upon the flute, Allegra managed to finish the composition, with Sissy humming along with it. When she followed a melody, Allegra realized, Sissy had a beautiful voice; she repeated the first stanza just so she could hear more of it. When she was done, she lowered her instrument, but was careful not to speak. Let the moment take its own course. . . .

"That's a nice song," Sissy said quietly, not opening her eyes. "What's it called?"

"'Deerfield River,'" Allegra replied. "Do you like it?"

A nod, ever so slight. "I think I remember it. Wasn't it once in a movie?"

"No . . . no, not that I know of." Although there were probably other pieces that sounded a bit like it; Allegra's style had been influenced by earlier composers. "It's my own. I wrote it for . . ."

"I think I once heard it in a movie. The one where there's a man who meets this woman in Vienna, and they fall in love even though she's dying, and then they . . ." She stopped abruptly, and opened her eyes to gaze off into some private memory. "It's a great movie. I really liked it. Jim and I saw it . . . oh, I don't know how many times. I'm sorry about the chicken. It was meant to be a joke, but I don't think you thought it was very funny."

The abrupt change of subject caught Allegra off-guard. For a moment, she didn't know what Sissy was talking about. "Well . . . no, it wasn't, but . . ."

"That was Beatrice. She was very old and couldn't lay eggs anymore, and she'd bully the other hens, so I had to . . ." Her hands came together,

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made a throttling motion. "Very sad, very sad . . . I hope at least that you did something good with her."

"I took it to work," Allegra said. "At the community kitchen. We . . ."

"The grange."

"Yes, the grange hall. A friend of mine cleaned her and we had it . . . I mean, we had her . . . for lunch." She wondered if she should be saying this; Beatrice had apparently meant something to Sissy.

"Good. At least you didn't throw her away. That would've been . . . cruel. She laid good eggs, and it would have been disrespectful. You haven't thrown those away, I hope."

"Oh, no!" Allegra shook her head. "I've eaten every one. They're delicious. Thank you very much for . . ."

"Did you make this?" Sissy darted forward, snatched the flute from her hands. Afraid that she'd damage it, Allegra started to reach for her instrument, but stopped herself when she saw how carefully Sissy handled it. She closely studied the patterns carved along the shaft, then before Allegra could object she blew into the mouthpiece. A harsh piping note came out, and she winced. "You do this much better. Can you make me one?"

"I . . . I'd be happy to." Allegra thought of the half-dozen inferior flutes in her shack, and briefly considered giving one to her neighbor. But no . . . she'd want one that sounded just like hers. "I'm already planning to make more, so I'll give you the first one I . . ."

"You're going to make more? Why?"

"Well, I was thinking about selling them. To earn a little more. . . ."

"No." Sissy didn't raise her voice, yet her tone was uncompromising. "No no no no. I won't allow you to sell anything out here. It'll bring the others, the . . ." She glanced in the direction of the ale-soaked laughter that brayed from the bonfires. "I don't want them around. If they come, they'll bring Rigil Kent."

"Oh, no. I don't intend sell them here." Allegra had recently struck up tentative friendships with various kiosk-owners in Shuttlefield, and there was even a shopowner in Liberty who'd expressed interest in her work. Like Sissy, she had no wish to have strangers appearing at her front door. Yet something else she said raised her attention. "Who . . . who's Rigil Kent?"

Sissy's face darkened, and for a moment Allegra was afraid that she'd said the wrong thing. But Sissy simply handed the flute back to her, then thrust her hands into the pockets of her threadbare apron.

"If he comes back," she said quietly, "you'll know."

She started to turn away, heading back toward her shack. Then she stopped and looked back at Allegra. "I'll give you more eggs if you teach me how to play. Can you do that?"

"I'd be delighted, Sissy."

Her brow raised in astonishment. "How do you know my name?"

"Chris told me."

"Chris." She scowled. "My son. Fat worthless . . ." She stopped herself, rubbed her eyes. "What did you say your name was?"

"Allegra. Allegra DiSilvio."

She considered this. "Nice name. Sounds like music. The movie I saw, it

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was called . . ." She shook her head. "Never mind. I'm Cecelia . . . my friends call me Sissy."

"Pleased to meet you, Sissy," Allegra said. "Drop by anytime."

"No more chickens. I promise." And then she walked away. Allegra watched until she disappeared inside her shack, and then she let out her breath.

At least she was speaking to her now.

Three nights later, she met Rigil Kent.

Allegra had no desire to participate in the First Landing Day festivities, but it was hard to avoid them; when she reported to work that morning, the kitchen staff was already busy preparing for the evening fiesta. Several hogs had been slaughtered the night before and were now being slow-roasted in the smokehouse behind the hall, while huge cauldrons of potatoes and beans simmered on the kitchen stoves; out back, kegs of sourgrass ale were being unloaded from a cart. After breakfast was over, while the cooks began baking bread and strawberry pie, she helped cover the table with fresh white linen, upon which were placed centerpieces of fresh-cut wildflowers.

Matriarch Luisa Hernandez stopped by shortly after noon. A thick-set woman with short auburn hair beneath the raised hood of her blue robe, the colonial governor was seldom seen in public; this was only the third time Allegra had laid eyes upon her. She hovered near the door, silently observing the preparations, Savant Castro at her side speaking to her in a low voice. At one point, Allegra glanced over to see the Matriarch studying her from across the room. Their eyes met, and a faint smile touched the other woman's lips. She briefly nodded to Allegra. Feeling a chill, Allegra went back to setting tables; when she looked again, the Matriarch had disappeared, as had Manuel Castro.

Did the Matriarch know who she was? She had to assume that she did. With any luck, she would leave her alone.

What surprised her the most, though, was one of the decorations: a flag of the United Republic of America, carefully unwrapped from a plastic bag and suspended from the rafters high above the hall. When Allegra asked where it had come from, one of the cooks told her that it had been presented to Captain Robert E. Lee shortly before the *Alabama* escaped from Earth. The original settlers had left it behind, and now it was kept by Matriarch Hernandez in trust for the colony, to be publicly displayed only on this day.

Only on this day. For most of the Coyote year—1,096 days, or three Earth years—the colony carefully doled out its meager resources in only dribs and drabs. There were few other holidays, and none as important or elaborate as this; on this day, the residents of Shuttlefield gathered together at the community hall for a great feast commemorating the arrival of the *Alabama*. Yet as she headed home, she saw shopkeepers closing storm shutters and nailing boards across their doors, noted the absence of children, the increased visibility of Proctors and Union Guard soldiers.

Now she understood. This was the day the proletariat would be allowed to gorge themselves on rich food, get drunk on ale, celebrate a ghastly

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replication of freedom under the indulgent yet watchful eye of Union authority. A brief loosening of the leash to keep the commoners happy and content, while tactfully reminding them that this was only a temporary condition. Walking through Shuttlefield she saw that this subtlety had been lost on everyone. No one was working today, and by early afternoon the First Landing celebration was already in full swing. Out in the streets, the various guilds and groups that ruled Shuttlefield were carousing beneath the autumn sun: handmade banners hoisted above tents and shacks, while drunks staggered about with beads around their necks and wildness in their eyes, proclaiming everyone they saw to be their best friend. The paths between the camps were jagged with broken ale jars, the air rank with smoke, alcohol, and piss. She came upon a crowd cheering at something in their midst; stepping closer, Allegra saw two naked men, their bodies caked with mud, wrestling in the middle of a drainage ditch.

Disgusted, she quickly moved away, only to have her arm grabbed by someone who thought she needed a kiss. She managed to pull herself free, but he wasn't giving up so easily. "C'mon, sweets, y'know you wan' it," he slurred as he followed her down the street. "Jus' a lil' sugar, thas'all I . . ."

"Get lost, Will," a familiar voice said. "Leave her alone, or you'll spend the night in the stockade."

Allegra looked around, found Chris Levin behind her. Two other Proctors were with him; one had already twisted the drunk's arm behind his back, and the other booted the drunk in the ass. He fell face-down into the mud, muttered an obscenity, then hauled himself to his feet and wandered away.

"Sorry about that." Chris paid little attention to what was going on behind them. "You're not hurt, are you?"

An odd question, considering what his men had just done to the drunk. "You didn't need to . . ."

"Sorry, but I think I did." He turned to his officers. "You guys continue patrol. I'll walk her home." They nodded and headed away. "And keep an eye on the creek," he called after them. "If you see anything, let me know."

This piqued her curiosity; he obviously meant Sand Creek, the narrow river that bordered the two settlements to the east. Chris saw the puzzled look on her face. "Nothing for you to worry about," he said quietly. "Look, if you don't mind, I'd like for you to stay with my mother tonight. You may have to skip the fiesta, but . . ."

"That's all right. I wasn't planning to attend anyway." From what she'd already seen, the last place she wanted to be was the community hall.

"I was hoping you'd say that." He seemed genuinely relieved. "If you want, I can have dinner brought over to you . . ."

"I'd appreciate that." They sidestepped a couple of more drunks swaggering down the street, their arms around each other. One of them bumped shoulders with Chris; he turned and started to swear at the Chief Proctor, then realized who he was and thought better of it. Chris stared them down, then ushered Allegra away. "One more thing," he murmured, reaching beneath his jacket. "I think you should keep this with you."

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She stared at the small pistol he offered her. A Peacekeeper Mark III flechette gun, the type carried by the Union Guard. "No, sorry . . . that's where I draw the line."

Chris hesitated, then saw that arguing with her was pointless. "Suit yourself," he said. He reholstered the pistol, then unclipped a com unit from his belt. "But carry this, at least. If you run into any trouble, give us a call. We'll have someone out there as quick as we can."

Allegra accepted the com, slipped it in a pocket of her catskin vest. "Are you really expecting much trouble tonight?"

"Not really. Things might get a little out of control once people start drinking hard, but . . ." He shrugged. "Nothing we can't handle." Then he paused. "But there's a small chance that Mama might . . . well, someone might come to see her that she doesn't want to see."

"Rigil Kent?"

She smiled when she said that, meaning it as a joke, yet Chris gave her a sharp look. "What has she told you?" he asked, his voice low.

This surprised her, although she was quick enough to hide her expression. Until now, she'd assumed that "Rigil Kent" was a manifestation of Sissy's madness, an imaginary person she'd created as a stand-in for everyone she distrusted. Certainly there was no one in the colony who went by that name; she'd already checked the roll to make sure. But Chris apparently accepted him as being real.

"A little." Which wasn't entirely untruthful. "Enough to know that she hates him."

Chris was quiet for a moment. "He may come into town tonight," he said. "This time last year, he led a small raiding party up Sand Creek. They broke into the armory in Liberty and made off with some guns, then left a note on the door signed as Rigil Kent." He shook his head. "You don't need to know what it said. But before they did all that, he stopped by to see Mama. He wanted her to come with them. She refused, of course . . . she despises him almost as much as I do."

"Of course. Can't blame her."

This caused him to raise an eyebrow. "Then you know what he did."

She shrugged. "Like I said, not very much. She hasn't told me everything."

"Probably not." He looked down at the ground as they walked along. "He used to be my best friend, back when we were kids. But then he killed my brother and . . . anyway, there's things you just don't forgive."

Apparently not. And now she had a better idea whom he was talking about. "If he shows up, I'll let you know."

"I'd appreciate it." By now they were on the outskirts of town; her shack was only a few hundred feet away. "You know, she's really come to like you," he said. "That's a major accomplishment . . . for her, I mean. She used to live in Liberty, in the cabin my dad built for us. I still live there, but she moved all the way out here because she didn't want to see anyone any more . . . not even me. But you've managed to get through to her somehow."

"We've got much in common," Allegra said. And this, at least, wasn't a lie.

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* * *

Allegra took a nap, then changed into a long skirt and a sweater. Through her window, she could see Uma setting to the west, Bear rising to the east. She usually began making dinner about this time, but tonight she'd get a break from that chore, if Chris kept his word about sending over food from the community hall. So she picked up her flute, along with the one she'd finished the previous evening, and went out to sit on the porch and watch the sun go down.

As twilight set in, Shuttlefield went quiet. No doubt everyone had gone into Liberty for the fiesta. She waited until she heard the chickens clucking in her neighbor's back yard, then she picked up her flute and began to play. Not one of her own pieces this time, but a traditional English hymn she'd learned while studying music at Berklee. For some reason, it seemed appropriate for the moment.

After awhile, she heard the door of Sissy's shack creak open. Allegra didn't look up but continued playing, and a minute later there was a faint rustle of an apron next to her. "That's very nice," Sissy said quietly. "What's it called?"

"'Jerusalem.'" Allegra smiled. "It's really easy to play. Would you like to try?"

Sissy quickly shook her head. "Oh, no . . . I can't. . . ."

"No, really. It's simple. Here . . ." She picked up the new flute. "I made this for you. Try it out."

Sissy stared at it. "I . . . but I have to start dinner. . . ."

"No, you don't. It's being brought to us tonight. Ham, potatoes, fresh greens, pie . . . the works." She grinned. "Believe me, it's good. Helped make it myself."

Sissy stared at her, and Allegra realized that it was probably the first time in many years that she had been offered a meal. For a few seconds she was afraid that her neighbor would flee back to her windowless hovel, slam the door shut and not emerge again for several days. Yet a look of wary acceptance came upon her face; taking the flute, Sissy sat down on the porch.

"Show me how you do this," she said.

It didn't take long for her to learn how to work the fingerholes; teaching her how to master the first chords, though, took a little more effort. Yet Sissy didn't give up; she seemed determined to learn how to play, and she gave Allegra her undivided attention as the younger woman patiently demonstrated the basic fingering techniques.

They took a break when someone arrived with two covered baskets. Allegra carried them inside; Sissy was reluctant to follow her, until Allegra pointed out that it would be much less messy if they ate indoors. The older woman stood quietly, her hands folded in front of her, and watched as she lit the oil lamp and set the table for two. Allegra only had one chair; she was about to sit on the bed when Sissy abruptly disappeared, returning a few moments later with a rickety chair of her own. She placed it at the table, then sat down and watched as Allegra served her a plate.

They ate in silence; through the open door, they could hear the distant sounds of the First Landing festivities. The night was becoming cool, so Allegra shut the door, then put some wood in the stove and started a fire.

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Sissy never looked up from her meal; she ate with total concentration, never speaking, even though she cleaned her plate and beckoned for seconds. Allegra wondered how long it had been since she had eaten anything except chicken and eggs. She made a note to herself to start bringing home leftovers from the kitchen; malnutrition might have something to do with her mental condition. . . .

"Why are you here?" Sissy asked.

The question was abrupt, without preamble . . . and, Allegra realized, it was the very same one she'd posed the night they first met. Yet this time they weren't strangers, but two friends enjoying a quiet dinner together. How much had changed since then.

"You mean, why did I come here?" Allegra shrugged. "Like I told you . . . I couldn't find anywhere else in town, so I pitched my . . ."

"That's not what I mean."

Allegra didn't say anything for a moment. She put her knife and fork together on her plate and folded her hands together, and turned her gaze toward the window. Far away across the fields, she could see the houselights of Liberty; in that instant, they resembled the lights of cities she had left behind, the places she had visited. New York, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City . . .

"A long time ago," she began, "I was . . . well, I wasn't rich, nor was I famous, but I had a lot of money and I was quite well-known. For what I do, I mean. . . ."

"For making music."

"For making music, yes." She absently played with her fork, stirring some gravy left on her plate. "I traveled a great deal and I was constantly in demand as a composer, and all the people I knew were artists who were also rich and famous." As rich as social collectivism would allow, at least; she'd learned how to quietly stash her overseas royalties in trust funds maintained by European banks, as many people did to avoid the domestic salary caps imposed by the Union. But that was complicated, and there was no reason why Sissy should have to know this. "And for awhile I was satisfied with my life, but then . . . I don't know. At some point, I stopped enjoying life. It seemed as if everyone I knew was a stranger, that the only things they wanted were more fame, more money, and all I wanted was to practice my art. And then one day, I found that I couldn't even do that any more. . . ."

"You couldn't make music?"

Allegra didn't look up. "No. Oh, I could still play . . ." she picked up her flute from where she had placed on the table ". . . but nothing new came to me, just variations of things I'd done before. And when it became obvious to everyone that I was blocked, all the people I thought were my friends went away, and I was alone."

"What about your family?"

She felt wetness at the corners of her eyes. "No family. I never made time for that. Too busy. There was once someone I loved, but . . ." She took a deep breath that rattled in her throat. "Well, it wasn't long before he was gone, too."

Allegra picked up the napkin from her lap, daubed her eyes. "So I de-

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cided to leave everything behind, go as far away as I could. The Union Astronautica had started the public lottery for people who wanted to come here. The selection was supposed to be totally random, but I met someone who knew how to rig the system. I gave him everything I'd owned so that I'd get a winning number, then took only what I could carry in my bag. And . . .well, anyway, here I am."

"So why are you here?"

Allegra gazed across the table at Sissy. Hadn't she heard anything she had just said? Just as on Earth, everything she did was pointless: another exercise in self-indulgence. Yet she couldn't bring herself to scold her neighbor. It wasn't Sissy's fault that she was disturbed. Someone had hurt her a long time ago, and now . . .

"Excuse me. I think I need to visit the privy." Allegra pushed back her chair, stood up. "If you'd gather the dishes and put 'em over there, I'll wash them tomorrow."

"Okay." Sissy continued to stare at her. "If there's any food left, can I give it to my chickens?"

"Sure. Why not?" She tried not to laugh. Her best friend was a lunatic who cared more about her damn birds. "I'll be back," she said, then opened the door and stepped outside.

The night was darker than she'd expected; a thick blanket of clouds had moved across the sky, obscuring the wan light cast by Bear. She regretted not having carried a lamp with her, yet the privy was located only a couple of dozen feet behind her house, and she knew the way by memory.

She was halfway across the back yard, though, when she heard the soft crackle of a foot stepping upon dry grass, somewhere close behind her.

Allegra stopped, slowly turned . . . and a rod was thrust against her chest. "Hold it," a voice said, very quietly. "Don't move."

Against the darkness, she detected a vague form. The rod was a rifle barrel; of that she was certain, although she couldn't see anything else. "Sure, all right," she whispered, even as she realized that the voice had spoken in Old English. "Please don't hurt me."

"We won't, if you cooperate." *We* won't? That meant there were others nearby. "Where's Cecelia?"

"I don't . . ." It took Allegra a moment to realize that he meant Sissy. "She's gone. I don't know where she is . . . maybe at the fiesta."

By now her eyes had become dark-adapted, and she could make out the figure a little better: a bearded young man, probably in his early twenties, wearing a catskin serape, his face shrouded by a broad hat. She carefully kept her hands in sight, and although he didn't turn it away from her, at least he stepped back a little when he saw that she wasn't armed.

"I rather doubt that," he murmured. "She doesn't go into town much."

"How would you know?"

A pause. "Then you know who I am."

"I've got a good idea. . . ."

"Get this over, man," a voice whispered from behind her. "We're running out of . . ."

"Calm down." The intruder hesitated, his head briefly turning toward her cabin. "Is she in there?" She didn't answer. "Call her out."

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"No. Sorry, but I won't."

He let out his breath. "Look, I'm not going to hurt her, or you either. I just want to talk to . . ."

"She doesn't want to talk to you." Allegra remembered the com Chris had given her. It was on her bedside table, where she had put it before she had taken her afternoon nap. Yet even if she could get to it, she wasn't sure how much difference it would make. The Proctors were a long way off, and these men sounded as if they were anxious to leave. "If you want to speak to her, you're going to have to go in there yourself."

He took a step toward the cabin. "Carlos, damn it!" the one behind her snapped. "We don't have time for this! Let's go!"

Carlos. Now she knew who he was, even if she had only suspected it before: Carlos Montero, one of the original settlers. The teenager who had sailed alone down the Great Equatorial River, charting the southern coast of Midland the year after the *Alabama* arrived. Like the other colonists, he'd vanished into the wilderness when the *Glorious Destiny* showed up. Now he was back.

"So you're Rigil Kent," she whispered. "Glad to make your acquaintance."

"Guess they found my note." He chuckled softly. "I imagine Chris doesn't have much good to say about me."

"Neither does his mother. Please, just leave her alone."

"Look, I don't want to push this." He lowered his gun. "Would you just deliver a message. . . ?"

"Dammit!" Now the second figure came in sight; Allegra wasn't surprised to see that he wasn't much older than Carlos, also wearing a poncho and carrying a rifle. He grasped his friend's arm, pulling him away. "Time's up, man! Move or lose it!"

"Cut it out, Barry." Carlos shook off his hand, looked at Allegra again. "Tell her Susan's all right, that she's doing well, and so's Wendy. Tell her that we miss her, and if she ever changes her mind, all she has to do is . . ."

A brilliant flash from the direction of the landing field. For a moment Allegra thought someone was shooting off fireworks, then the hollow thud of an explosion rippled across the Shuttlefield as a ball of fire rose above the settlement. She suddenly knew what it was: one of the *Long Journey* shuttles blowing up.

"That's it! We're out of here!" Barry turned to run, sprinting away into the dark marshland behind the shacks. "Go!"

Yet Carlos lingered for another moment. Now Allegra could see him clearly; there was a ruthless grin on his face as he looked at her one last time. "And one more thing," he said, no longer bothering to keep his voice low, "and you can pass this along to Chris or whoever else . . . Coyote belongs to us!" He jabbed a finger toward the explosion. "Rigil Kent was here!"

And then he was gone, loping off into the swamp. In another moment he had vanished, leaving behind the shouts of angry and frightened men, the rank odor of burning fuel.

Wrapping her arms around herself, Allegra walked back to the cabin. As she turned the corner, she was surprised to find Sissy standing outside

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the door. She watched the distant conflagration, her face without emotion. Allegra saw that she clutched her flute.

"He returned." Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "I knew he would."

"I . . . I saw him." Allegra came closer, intending to comfort her. "He was outside. He told me to tell you . . ."

"I know. I heard everything . . . every word."

And then she raised the flute, put it to her mouth, and began to play the opening bars of "Jerusalem." Flawlessly, without a single missed note.

The shuttle burned all night; by morning it was a blackened skeleton that lay in the center of the landing field. Fortunately the blaze didn't spread to the rest of Shuttlefield; Allegra would later learn that the townspeople, upon realizing that their homes weren't in danger, abandoned all efforts at forming a bucket brigade and spent the rest of the night dancing around the burning spacecraft, throwing empty ale jugs into the pyre. It was the highlight of First Landing Day, one which people would talk about for a long time to come.

Later that day, Chris Levin came out to check on his mother. She was through feeding the chickens, though, and didn't want to talk to him. The door of her shack remained shut even after he pounded on it, and after awhile he gave up and walked over to visit Allegra. She told him that they'd spent a quiet evening in her house, and were unaware of any trouble until they heard the explosion. No, they hadn't seen anyone; did he know who was responsible? Chris didn't seem entirely satisfied by this answer, but he didn't challenge it, either. Allegra returned the com he'd lent her, and he left once again.

In the months to come, as the last warm days faded away and the long autumn set in, she continued to make flutes. Once she had enough, she began selling them to shops and kiosks. Most of those who purchased them didn't know how to play them, so she began giving lessons, at first in Shuttlefield, then in Liberty. By midwinter she was holding weekly seminars in the community center, and earning enough that she was eventually able to quit her job as a dishwasher. Some of her students turned out to have talent, and it wasn't long before she had trained enough musicians to form the Coyote Wood Ensemble.

One morning, she awoke to see the first flakes of snow falling upon the marshes. Winter was coming, and yet she didn't feel the cold. Instead she heard a muse whose voice she hadn't heard in many years. She picked up her flute, put it to her lips, and without thinking about what she was doing, began to play an unfamiliar melody; for her, it sounded like a song of redemption. When she was done, there were tears in her eyes. Two days later, she taught it to her students. She called the piece "Cecelia."

Yet despite invitations to move to Liberty, she remained in Shuttlefield, living in a small one-room cabin on the outskirts of town. Every morning, just after sunrise, she sat outside and waited for her neighbor to finish feeding the chickens. And then, regardless of whether the days were warm or if there was snow on the ground, they would practice together. Two women, playing the flute, watching the sun come up over Shuttlefield.

And waiting. Waiting for the return of Rigil Kent. O

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THE APOCALYPSE ACCORDING TO OLAF

Barth Anderson

Barth Anderson tells us he was infected by the germ for the following tale while driving across the Midwest to the Clarion Writers Workshop. He has sold stories to *New Genre*, *On Spec*, *Strange Horizons*, *Talebones*, *Rabid Transit: New Fiction by the Ratbastards*, *Alchemy*, and *Mojo: Conjure*. "The Apocalypse According to Olaf" is his first story for *Asimov's*.

I wake from my spell, and I can't see the ocean anymore. I find myself in a different downtown, sitting on the steps of a pizza parlor. The smell of cigarettes, beer and pepperonis gets me in the mouth. I pretend I'm waiting for someone, but the angry faces say my clothes aren't clean enough for this place. They aren't warm enough either. I must be in the north again.

An empty black matchbook at my feet reads, *Hyatt Regency, Chicago*. That's a long way from Sarasota. This spell was heavier than usual. Lucky for me, I take notes when I have spells. On the pizza parlor's steps, I find one in my shirt pocket, says, *2/2/00: GO FIND STEFFAN ON WABASH* in my own handwriting.

It takes me all afternoon but I find a homeless shelter on Wabash. I find a door with bars on the window and the transom bolted shut. The door is unlocked, though, and at the top of the steps, standing beneath a bare bulb, I see a scrawny young man with long hair like Conan the Barbarian. He welcomes me like he's known me his whole life. "I've been waiting for you. Glad you found me!"

"I'm looking for Steffan," I say.

"That's me." He pats my arm. "Are you homeless?"

Something about that word gets me. I feel like I got a wet sponge in my

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throat. That word. Home. Less. Makes me feel sorry for myself. Life treated me so good for so long, until the spells came back. I had them when I was a kid, but they came back full force when I turned thirty. And when the spells come, everything goes. The worst of all? My marriage fell apart. Janice said I hurt her. Said I started a fire in the house. I wrote weird words on the walls with a burnt stick: VIDALIA and BOAZ and JACHIN. I saw the words in my writing, but I don't remember doing that. All I remember is my spell, my mind's dark sky.

Steffan's hand on my arm makes me think I finally woke up some place good. I tell him, "I'm homeless. We know each other, Steffan?"

"I know you." He smiles wide, shows his perfect teeth. I decide to trust that smile. Steffan shows me to a cot next to his in a crowded dormitory. Twenty or thirty really hard guys, you know, in a room of yellow tiles that smells like gym and jizz.

For the first hour, while Steffan gets new men like me situated in the shelter, I stick to my cot like it's my castle and watch this one crazy guy. He's at the other end of the shelter in a Taco Bell baseball cap. He lunges and stops short, like he's getting ready to jump across a hole. But there's nothing there but yellow tiles.

"Up and down!" he shouts, lunging. "Up and down and up! And down!"

Steffan joins me for a minute and we watch the crazy guy. I ask Steffan what's with Up-and-Down Man.

"He broke. Now he's stuck on words that used to mean something to him." Steffan flicks his head back to get the hair out of his eyes and looks at the crazy man. "Too bad, too. He was a real prize, a medium just like you. Don't worry." He squeezes my arm and holds it, hard, showing me his straight teeth. "I won't let *you* end up like him."

I'm not sure what Steffan means, but I'm glad to have someone looking out for me.

That night, Steffan takes off. Three loud Jamaican guys show up and offer me rum. I ain't a drinker, but I hang with them anyway because they seem like kings of the shelter and I'm lonely. It don't take much rum to make me pass out. Which is bad. You can't go to sleep in a shelter with anything in your pockets. If you do, they'll take a razor and cut the pocket out.

I wake up and my wallet and last eleven dollars are gone. February in a Chicago homeless shelter. Flat broke. No pockets. God bless.

That morning, Steffan hears what happened. He buys me coffee and a day-old roll. We're on a cement bridge looking at that weird, green river running between Chicago's skyscrapers. I drink my watery coffee and say, "Steffan, why you so kind to me?"

Steffan's a heavy-metal boy, wears a Judas Priest concert T-shirt and tight black jeans. But all of a sudden he sounds different, like a really old man with spit in his voice. "Call of the wild ones, yes, yes! Full-fledged formation!" Steffan laughs and coughs, looks embarrassed. "I mean, we called for you because you're special. We'd like you to help us." He adds, "Willingly."

I wonder who he means by We. Us. I wonder why he spoke in that other voice. "How do I help, Steffan?"

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"We're looking for some men named Olaf and Gordon. They want to hurt us," Steffan says in his own voice. He chews his bread and smiles, but then his voice is that old, crazed growl again. "Those stinking Vidalia Boys gave us the slipper! We prayed to Boaz and Jachin for a medium, and here you are! Give us your spells, mama's milk!"

Vidalia. I jump when I hear him use that word. *Boaz? Jachin?* No way he could know those words. And no way he could know my spells, either. "What is Vidalia? Why do I know Boaz and Jachin? What's going on here?"

Steffan appraises me like I'm a woman he wants. "You know about Boaz and Jachin? Damn, we got lucky with you." He holds out another roll to me. "Strength and stability, that's what the words mean. Boaz plus Jachin equal magic. They're the two halves of true power, and we're always looking for more." He grins and chews and grins. "Like yours, maybe?"

All of a sudden, I don't feel so safe with Steffan. I take a step backward but Steffan steps with me, like we're dancing. "You gonna turn me into Up-and-Down Man?"

"You practically *are* Up-and-Down Man," says Steffan. Then he says in his old growl, "I broke you once to show you who's stronger. Now I'm gonna use you to suck all the Boaz and Jachin from the deadboots living it up at the homely shelter. Then we'll have enough joo-joo to suck the last bit from Olaf and Gordon, too!"

Now, the one thing I got going for me is that I see true. I can see the things about people that might take others years to learn. So I look at Steffan's true, and I wish I'd done it yesterday. A symbol appears over his head, like an orange Chinese letter floating in the air. Behind that, I see a red symbol, concealed. He's two in one, two demons inside one man. Both want to feed off me—and my ability to see true.

I look up, you know, at Chicago's towers. The sky feels close to my head. Something is about to happen. Maybe a spell. I hear the ocean calling my name. *Where you at?* It asks in the most peaceful voice I ever heard. *You hear me, mister medium?* It's only been a day since my last spell so this shouldn't be happening.

"Are you trying to escape?" says Steffan like I amuse him. "Maybe I should've let my boys take your soul instead of your dough last night, huh? Maybe I should break you open right now." He crowds me, stares at me with his hateful eyes. Over his head, I can see that hidden red symbol. It reminds me of something old. Something evil dwelling where it shouldn't. In this guy named Steffan. In a secluded Iowa farmhouse. A gun. A little boy. "I know you, don't I?"

Steffan's face flushes pink. "Break," he commands.

My upper body goes numb. My knees barely lock.

He growls in frustration, "I said *break!*" His thin, little fist shoots out and grabs my left arm. I can't stop him. My wrist bones snap when he touches me, and I scream.

But the ocean rolls deep in its serene voice, *Hope this helps, wherever you are, mister medium*. My pain fades. The sky droops close to my head again. That spell is coming to save me.

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"Who's calling you? Huh?" Steffan shouts into my face as if I'm a megaphone. "Olaf, is that you? Get away from my prize!"

The gray sky is unfolding fast over my head like a nature show orchid. It turns itself inside out and the blank time comes, with Steffan's weasel face glaring into mine. "Break! Break, break, break. . . ."

I can only half remember things during spells. Flashes, you know. A painful explosion like a gunshot over my head. The smell of corn tassels in a field. I hear the ocean like I got my ear in a seashell, a sound that fills me with calm. The ocean says, *Where you at? We need your help. Where you at?*

The corn smells and sea-words peel away, and when I wake from my spell this time, I am sitting at a little wooden table, a café's window seat. I'm talking to a middle-aged man wearing a thick grey sweater. He's got a red beard and good-dog eyes, and he looks real concerned, staring at me. "Did you hear what I said?" he asks.

"Sorry, no." I'm trembling, remembering Steffan's skinny, angry face. I tap my mouth with the pads of my index and middle fingertips—a strange nervous tic that isn't mine, but I can't seem to stop it. My left arm is deeply bruised and lumpy, but it doesn't hurt much. Out the window, I can see a giant skull on a hill with malicious, empty eyes. I try not to look at that. I sip my coffee. It's hot and bittersweet with all the sugar I like.

The man seems patient, his voice even and friendly. "I asked, did you take the meds I gave you on Wednesday?"

"I don't know. I try," I say vaguely, not really certain what he means by *meds* or *Wednesday*.

"I know you took some. You've got the tell-tale twitch," he says, twiddling his fingers on his lips. "Do you still have them? You didn't sell them, did you?"

I laugh, thinking to myself that I got no pockets to keep meds or money in. Then I realize I have a new pair of pants—corduroys with pockets. The right hand pocket has a little brown bottle in it. I remove it and rattle the pills inside.

He doesn't smile like I hoped. He's looking at the bottle. A Chinese-like letter, bright green, appears on his cheek. He believes the pills will help me and he doesn't want me to be as fragile as I am, living on the street. This amazes me. I'm always blown away when people are good to each other like this. I ask, "Why you being so kind to me?"

"You seem like you need the help," he smiles. "But you haven't been taking those meds. Will you take two now, with your coffee?"

I tap out two pills. I wash them down and then look into the cup. This coffee is fantastic.

He puts a hand on my hand. "Thank you. They'll make you more stable. You'll feel stronger. Are you still hanging out here every day? Kathy says it's okay if you do."

I nod. That sounds reasonable, though I don't know who Kathy is. I keep my eyes on my cup, avoiding the black eye sockets of that towering skull outside.

He shakes my right hand. "I'll come see you again. I promise."

And he does come see me again. His name is Hank and he's a social

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worker. He works with the shelter where I stay, a resort compared to that hellhole in Chicago.

Madison, Wisconsin. That's where it turns out I am. And the skull turns out to be nothing more than the Capitol building, a great white dome. My mistake. I see these things because I see reality now. I clear out of the shelter during the day and I hang out at Sacred Grounds because I get free refills and as long as I don't bother the students, Kathy lets me stay as long as I like.

I can tell I'm normal. My mind is a pull car on a straight track, carrying me forward in a deliberate, careful line. My brain doesn't veer off and fall into holes anymore, "spells" as I used to call them. I'm not haunted by possessed heavy-metal boys or mysterious messages from the ocean anymore. I complete my thoughts one, two, three, and my days click by in a nice, straight line.

This is lithium. God bless lithium, that's my motto.

One morning, I look up from my newspaper and sugary coffee. I see two men sitting at the table next to mine. I tap my lips and look them over. The littler guy is white. Looks like someone plucked him out of an office job and made him walk down a highway for a year. He's gaunt as a skeleton, wears this drab olive jacket, drab grey pants, and black galoshes with duct tape on the heels. The other guy is his opposite. A witch doctor in sunglasses. He's big like me—all shoulders and gut—wearing baggy red pants, a bright blue shirt, and a Mexican poncho. Under a fedora decorated with feathers of every color is white hair cropped close to black skin.

"Am I right, Olaf?" the scrawny white guy says to his big friend. "'A-part-ment.' People today are 'meant' to be 'apart.' See?"

The black guy laughs hard, big belly heaving. "That's right. Yes, Gordon, yes."

Olaf and Gordon. Do I know them? Twiddle, twiddle.

"This world is insane," says Gordon. "Words mean the opposite of what they're supposed to here. That's a bad sign for us."

"True." Olaf sobers and wipes the tears from his cheeks. "'Apocalypse' means 'ending' here. 'Destruction.' That's just wack. I mean, apocalypse used to mean a truth revealed, enlightenment." Olaf leans back and folds his huge arms. "Sad thing when good words go bad."

Gordon is about to speak, but his face hardens as he stares at the café door beneath jack o' lantern eyebrows. Olaf turns to the entrance and squints over the tops of his mirrored sunglasses.

Steffan walks in, swaggering right by me on his way to the counter. I lift the newspaper to hide my face. Kathy passes by and refills my cup. I try to ask her to help sneak me out the back or something, but I can't speak. She lopes to the counter and takes Steffan's order for a latte.

Holding my paper so that I can see Steffan over the top, I spy on the other two around the edge. Gordon says to Olaf, "Ready?" Then the two of them make a gesture with their hands: two okay signs with the O's held together.

Steffan jerks his head in their direction as if someone broke a glass. Kathy hands Steffan his latte, eyeing him with suspicion.

With his pinky, Steffan touches left cheek then right, left cheek then

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right again. Then he walks over to their table, saying, "I don't know about you boys, but I'm ready to rumble."

The newspaper shivers in my hands. Gordon pretends to fuss over his ratty black tie, but he's as scared as I am.

Olaf leans his bread-loaf forearms on the table and Steffan takes a step backward. "No sense fighting. We're stalemated," Olaf says, and his voice rolls deep, "until one of us finds the medium you called."

Steffan takes a drink, grumbling low in his throat like a dog guarding a bone.

With the toe of his sneaker, Olaf pushes the third chair out from their table. "We know you saw mister medium in Chicago."

Steffan sighs. "You dominate so many worlds, Olaf."

"Dominate? Dog, after all this time, you don't know squat about me."

"I know about Catal Huyuk. Palenque. Old Jerusalem." Steffan pushes the offered chair back. "But this one's mine. No bargaining with you here."

"Those are strong, solid homes, where folks take care of their own. I don't control nothing there," Olaf says. "You're everything wrong with this world, dog. You got no Boaz and Jachin, none but what you steal from helpless folks. You a vampire, and a weak one at that. Even mister medium resisted you."

"No Boaz and Jachin?" Steffan sneers, "I shattered his marriage! I took his last eleven bucks! I broke his wrist!"

Olaf shakes his head. "But you can't break him. He's stronger than you. He sees true."

"So? So what?"

"So all he has to do is see you for what you are and you're finished. That's why you should be reasonable and listen to our offer."

Didn't I see Steffan's true in Chicago? Isn't he a double demon? I twiddle my lips and wonder what Olaf means by that.

Steffan pulls the chair out abruptly and Gordon lets out a squeak in fright. "That what you think, Gordo?" says Steffan. "Think I can't open up my own treasure chest?"

Gordon looks down at his hands. Words are in his mouth but they don't come out.

"If we find your medium first," says Olaf, taking off his sunglasses, "we're going to help him see your true. I swear we'll leave you alone if you don't interfere."

"That's an offer? You'll break me if you help him see true," scoffs Steffan. "Why are we talking?"

Olaf spreads his hands as if stilling a jittery animal. "I'm saying, we won't *kill* you. You could even help—"

Steffan laughs and it sounds like coins rattling down a gutter. "You think helping my medium might make you powerful again. But it won't. Your day is done, Olaf. It ended when I broke Vidalia House, you old cuss."

Olaf leans back and folds his huge arms again, shaking his head in sadness.

"Besides, my life don't matter to me," Steffan says. Then he growls at

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Gordon in that ugly, other voice. "Gonna take a bubble bath in your blood, you little rat!"

Calmly, Olaf says, "When that monster shows up, conversation dies. Let's go, Gordon."

Then they both make the okay gesture one-handed, this time upside down.

Steffan looks left and right as if they've vanished from the café.

Gordon and Olaf get up and leave Sacred Grounds, leaving me just a few feet from Steffan. I'm still holding up that newspaper like it's bullet proof, but without Olaf here, I feel defenseless. I watch Steffan as he hunches over his drink like he's talking into a secret microphone. "The Vidalia Boys know where he is," says Steffan.

"They're liars!" Steffan shouts back at himself. "They got no Boaz and Jachin."

Kathy takes a spoon and clangs it on the top of her register until Steffan flicks his bangs back, scowling. "Keep your voice down or you're outta here," Kathy says, leveling her spoon at him.

Steffan salutes her with a stiff arm. "Full-fledged formation!"

Kathy rolls her eyes and glances at me. "Another red letter day at the loony bin."

When Kathy turns away, Steffan whispers into his glass. "I think the medium is near, old man. Can't you feel him?"

"Of *course,* I feel him!" The old voice can't keep quiet. "I shot a little hole in a little boy's soul! Catch twenty-two caliber!"

Kathy shouts, "Last chance. Quiet down or take a hike!"

For the first time since I started lithium, I try to see true. I stare at Steffan but his true ain't there. My face suddenly feels very cold.

"I ain't leaving until I finish my latte, bitchy-bitch," growls Steffan.

Kathy steps out from behind the counter with her cell phone, grabs his drink, and dumps it steaming in a bus bin by his table. "Are so."

Steffan slams his hands flat on the table. He's so angry his face starts to sizzle. I mean, really sizzle. Steffan's frying-pan face juts toward Kathy as he shoves his chair back. Kathy throws up a hand to protect herself as if hot grease might fly from him. "You ain't stronger than me," says Steffan.

She's shaken, but Kathy presses a button on the phone. "That's it. I got 911 on speed dial."

"She ain't worth Boaz and Jachin," Steffan roars. He gets up and twists through the chairs and tables then walks sideways through the door.

After putting down her phone, Kathy inspects her arm. "What the hell?" On the back of her wrist and elbow, I can see a stripe of little red welts, as if she were sprayed with hot liquid. "What in the hell?"

I look at Kathy's true. I don't see it. Nothing but Kathy and her burns. I look at the students drinking pots of coffee in the back. I look at the Capitol dome. I can see reality, but I can't see true.

I figure it's the lithium. Hank's pills took away my one gift. It's worse than being homeless and pocketless. No magic in a magic world.

I decide I can't let my brain be pulled along by the lithium anymore. I need to find Olaf and Gordon. If they want to help me, I better do my best to get found by them before I get found by Steffan.

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That night, I fall asleep in the shelter's big dorm. I'm the only one there, and I sleep deeper than I have in over a year: No meds in my stomach. The pill bottle is at the bottom of Madison's big lake.

In deep dark sleep, I dream my ocean dream again. It hits me like a tidal wave and rinses the last of the meds from my blood. *Help us. Let us help you. Help us. Let us help you. Boaz and Jachin,* the ocean says, and now that I've heard his voice, I recognize that it belongs to Olaf. *Strength and stability. Let us help you get them back. Help us. Let us help you.* His voice ripples in waves across the surface of a beachless sea. Then, like a low tide, the spell rushes away, and I find myself flung forward over somebody's broad back, wool scraping my throat and chest. It's night and I'm piggy-backing up an unlit embankment.

"Are you all right, Olaf?" I hear someone whisper behind me.

Olaf is carrying me up a steep concrete slope into a darker shadow.

I can hear Gordon huffing, almost whining behind us. I can hear rushing. Like water. Then my head hits something and I cry out. Olaf drops me and I cry out again as my body hits the cement. "Watch what you're doing, Olaf!" I shout.

"He's lucid?" says Olaf, looking down at me.

Gordon hushes both of us as his silhouette skitters close. His hands are making the upside-down okay gesture again. "God, be quiet. Please be quiet! He was right behind us!"

Olaf gets his big face close to mine. "You with us? You know what's happening, brother?"

I look down the smooth slope and see hot metal flowing at the base of this embankment. A molten river on a concrete shore. Over our heads, a bridge. I rub the pain out of my scalp. Slapping my various pockets in my new green shirt and dress pants, I look for clues, but I haven't left myself any.

With nothing else at my disposal, I look at Olaf and Gordon and try to see true. Lithium, I'm so glad you're gone, because I never saw true like this before. Beautiful letters, one on each of their foreheads, shining in the shadow of the bridge like candles. Olaf's and Gordon's flaming, gold letters are identical.

Then it all hits me in a flash. "Oh. Oh, I get it."

Gordon is impatient with me. "Steffan saw us in the movie theater. He'll figure we're not there soon enough!"

Olaf shushes Gordon, waving a meaty hand at his friend. "Hurry, brother. Tell us what you get."

I look back and forth between their faces, one pointy and narrow, the other round and soft. But it looks as if those golden symbols with mad, sure slashes were drawn by one hand. I point back and forth and remember Steffan's red and orange letters. "You're the opposite of Steffan. He's one that should be two. You fellows are two that should be one."

Olaf starts back from me like I'm a comet that just landed next to him. "I just wanted to know if you remembered what happened back there in the theater!"

I don't care what happened in the theater. Their symbols are like little books that I can't stop reading. I see so much true, I can't help myself.

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"You used to be one person, right? Steffan did this to you. At Vidalia House. That's how he and that growling voice got all in one body, right? He broke you in half and sewed himself and someone else together."

"Right." Olaf laughs his rumbling laugh, a peaceful sound. He points to Gordon. "My better half."

Gordon whispers in an urgent hiss, "He's ready, he's ready, Olaf! Show him true!"

Olaf looks irritated. "I can't just *do* it, Gordon."

"Show him!"

"Do you want to end up like that monster, hooked on junk power instead of serving strength and stability?"

"One of us will wind up a zombie either way, Olaf!"

Olaf levels a finger at Gordon. "We do this right or not at all."

I keep reading their true while they argue. Olaf and Gordon lived countless lives through history as just one person—a prophetess, a mountain mushroom-savant. One time, he was a powerful Hebrew temple-priest. That's where he learned about Boaz and Jachin, the two pillars of Solomon's temple. He got wiser all the time in those lives, helping people, steering them toward strength and stability. He did the same thing in this lifetime at a place called Vidalia House, a homeless shelter out in Boston. But something bad happened out there. The demons challenged him. Broke him in half, then did the same to everyone living in the House. Now he's homeless and weakening because Steffan divided him—I mean them—I *mean,* Olaf and Gordon. "Steffan's after you now? Is he coming?"

"Gordon killed the projector, which covered our escape," says Olaf, looking down the slope, "but Steffan's coming for you. It's only a matter of time."

I decide to ask Olaf something that's been bugging me. "That other demon inside Steffan? He did something to me?"

Olaf gives me a sly look. "You craftier than you let on. Yes, indeed, that monster wants you. Just like he wanted my home, Vidalia House."

"Why? Why would he want me?"

"Because he knows you got something good inside you, and he gets stronger breaking good things, like Vidalia House. And me. Now he's coming to break you." Olaf isn't wearing his sunglasses but he looks at me as if he's looking over the tops of them. "Do you know who that monster is?"

"No. Who?" I shake my head like a kid listening to a ghost story. "The devil?"

When he hears me say that, Gordon gawks and stops making that okay gesture. He slumps down to the cement, head in his hands. "He has no clue. We're doomed."

Olaf scoots closer to me and takes my hand the way Hank did when he explained the meds to me. "Your spells been protecting you your whole life but they blinding you too. You *have* to know who that monster is. It's time."

I think about what Olaf said in the café to Steffan. "You want me to see his true, is that it?"

Gordon lifts his head and says, "That's right! Yes!"

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"But I saw it," I say, like I'm pointing out a fair move in checkers. "Steffan is orange and that monster is red."

"But there's more, brother. I can help you see it if you want," says Olaf. "If you say you'll let me help you."

I'm about to ask if I'll end up like Up-and-Down Man when Gordon springs to his feet. "Oh my." He looks like a prairie dog. "Oh no."

"What is it?" I ask.

Gordon points a bony finger. A thin white guy is walking toward us along the banks of that molten, silver river.

Olaf squeezes my hand in his. "Do you trust me, brother?" He puts a hand on my shoulder. "I'm going to show you something."

Steffan is a shade against the molten stream.

Gordon looks so frightened I think he'll flee down the embankment. I want to run too, back to Madison. Or back home, if I had one. "Okay, Olaf. I trust you."

Gordon blinks at me and his eyes are a little wet. I hate seeing him so scared and sad. I hold out my hand and Gordon helps me to my feet.

"Gordon!" Steffan shouts up at us. "You shouldn't have fried that projector! I love a good horror flick!" Steffan stares hate at me and walks up the embankment in long strides until he's right in front of us. "All debts get paid right now. Kid," he points at me, "you owe me the most so you're first."

"Why?" says Gordon. "Afraid of me?"

When Steffan cocks his arm back to hit Gordon, I grab him by the elbow. Steffan's other hand lashes like a whip and clutches my throat. His expression glares lust and hate and fear at me, all in the same pair of eyes.

Skats.

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When I look at Steffan I can see the man I ain't thought of for years. They look different. Skats was a soldier-man and Steffan's just a kid, but they're the same.

Skats!

Same bad-ass posture. Same eyes, blank as a doll's.

Olaf stands next to me suddenly. I never saw him get up. His oceanic voice floods over me when he says, "Here comes the apocalypse."

That's when I go blank. A spell. The very last one I will ever have. The bridge parts and the sky droops until it touches my forehead. Then it drapes itself over me, Gordon, Olaf, Steffan, and—

And my mom's powder-blue farmhouse.

Skats was always in that farmhouse, day and night. He wasn't my dad. He lived in my Mom's farmhouse, just some leech she got stuck with. He hated me. I was five and he called me "that little mama's boy," even in front of Mom. Skats did mean things to me when he babysat. Once he had some army buddies over and they got mean drunk and took turns throwing silverware at me, seeing if they could make me cry. I never did. Skats liked I didn't cry. Hated it, too. After his friends left, he swatted me harder than he ever had before. "Gonna make you tough like me before the world chews you up, mama's milk."

But you bet I told my mother when she put me to bed the next night. I said I wanted her to tell Skats to go away. She told me there was nothing she could do. She needed him because she was going to have a baby. But she told me that Skats did the things he did because he saw something in me that he wished he had, like a treasure hidden in me. "You see true. Protect that treasure. Never let him or anyone take it from you."

I told her I'd protect myself. I told her I'd be stronger than Skats.

Problem was, Skats was standing in my bedroom doorway, listening.

The next time Mom left me alone with him, Skats sat down in the kitchen drinking whiskey by himself. Finally he got up and grabbed me by the wrist. "Stronger than me," he kept saying and dragged me out into the farmyard. He went to his truck and took his twenty-two out of the back. "You ain't stronger than me."

He marched me into our landlord's cornfield down a long hallway of stalks. I figured I would die out there. I figured Mom might never even find me. Treasure. Ha! She didn't care what happened to me if she left me with Skats like this. I didn't matter.

Skats told me to stand in front of him. "There. No, further." The whiskey made him wobbly. He slipped cartridges into the rifle. "Back up, you little fairy tale."

I tried not to look, but I could see that gun in Skats's hands. I looked up at the sky and prayed for it to take me away. I didn't want any of it, not Skats, not Mom, not her almighty baby.

I couldn't help it. I cried in front of Skats.

This was the occasion of my first spell. That day, the sky answered my plea to send me away. It drooped and blanked me good. But as I stood there looking up, I realized what a precious thing that was.

The sky did what a five-year-old asked.

Maybe Mom was right after all. Maybe I did have a treasure inside me.

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A strength. A stability. Maybe it was a power I'd never understand, not even as a grown-up, but I had it.

This time, I decided to let the sky stay in the sky. I stood there in the corn with my eyes open. Skats had a dark whiskey stain on the thigh of his jeans. Light glinted on the rifle's gunmetal. The dark circle of the barrel moved this way and that as he took aim. I stopped crying and that's when Skats shot at me.

I twisted. Maybe he meant to miss, but as I fell spinning, I could see the bullet hitting a corn stalk just over and behind my head. It hit the ear in slow motion. It tore diagonally through the corn, perfect kernels spraying their juice. Frayed cornsilks fluttered.

I lay there, head beneath my arms. The quiet in the farmyard paralyzed me. So did the sound of another cartridge locking into place. I lay waiting for my head to burst and flutter like the corn. The next shot went straight into the air and the whine of the bullet screamed forever. Then I sat up and looked at the meanest man I ever knew. Skats stared his dead eyes back at me. He slurred, "You just a boy. I'll always be stronger than you."

That red true sat squarely on his chest, the very same one I saw behind Steffan's in Chicago. Skats came to this house to steal a little kid's magic. Skats even called me to Chicago but he wasn't strong enough to take it. Never was, and never would be stronger than me. "Skats, go back to the house and stay put," I said.

As ordered, Skats, or the phantom of him, showed me his wide, flat back and walked unsteadily back to that old childhood house of mine.

I stood up and saw someone who I swear wasn't there the day I was five, when Skats took me into the cornfield. Feathered fedora. Sunglasses. A witch doctor standing in the tall corn. "Olaf, how can you be here?"

Olaf's laugh rolled in serene waves. "Time and place don't mean squat to an old cuss like me."

"Did you save me?"

"I just drew back the curtain. You saw what you needed to see," he said and held out a hand to indicate this field, that farmhouse, this shattered stalk of corn.

"But you helped me. You didn't know me from Adam," I said. "Why would you be so good to me, Olaf?"

"Had to," Olaf shrugged. "I knew what Steffan and Skats meant to do to you."

"Always thinking of others, is that it?"

"Naw. Makes me feel good to see folks get strong after they been sick. Just thinking of myself, is all," Olaf laughed. "One selfish soul, that's me."

I laugh too, but I see now that I'm the selfish one. I've spent my life being carried and cared for. Hardly much time caring about anyone else. "What happens to me now?" I ask.

But Olaf is gone. I'm all alone in my cornfield memory. But in my mind, a deep, satisfied voice, distant as storm clouds ebbing over the sea, says, *Make yourself feel good like I do. Go be selfish as hell.*

"Wait!" I shout. "I'm not ready to be that selfish!"

The blue sky retreats, takes me away for the last time, and quilts over with clouds. When I wake, I am on that concrete embankment again. The

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sun is young and golden, and I see shaggy green on the edges of the cement. It's an overpass. The molten river is really cars on a highway. My mistake.

I wonder where Olaf is. I want to hug him and thank him for helping me, but he's nowhere to be seen. That big white dome looms over the bridge. I'm still in Madison. At the bottom of the cement slope, I see Gordon walking toward the highway, hands folded, head bowed. The duct tape on his heels flashes. He steps like a witch walking over fire and cars zip in front of him while he talks to himself.

Near the top of the incline, where I hit my head on the bridge, I see Steffan and a rickety old man. Steffan's true is orange. The old man's is red. Skats is here. Skats and Steffan.

I reach into my pocket looking for a note. I find a dollar bill. Across the weird pyramid with the eyeball is written, BLESS YOU, JAMES! CALL US OLAF NOW! E PLURIBUS UNUM, EH? SO LONG, OLAF (AND GORDON).

Steffan makes eye contact. He wants to kill me, I can see in his haywire eyes. I face him and he stands up fast, as if I pulled a gun on him. "Leave us alone!"

"I'm gonna come talk to you in a minute," I shout.

Steffan doesn't wait. He darts across the embankment one way and the rickety old man darts off the other. "You leave me bee-bonnet!" Skats growls in his old, wet voice. "You got no causeway to hurt an old mannequin!"

I believe Skats is correct there. Watching them run in opposite directions, I say to myself, "So the demons split."

I come up behind Gordon at the bottom of the embankment. "Gordon?" I say, but he doesn't turn.

He's speaking, but I can't hear what he's saying over the cars honking at us.

I step up beside him so I can see his profile, his little chin-beard wagging. He mutters and stumbles with eyes vacant. "Gordon, what's wrong? Where's Olaf?"

Cars roar by ahead of us. The mouth that used to be Gordon's says, "Jachin and Boaz, Boaz and Jachin. Jachin and Boaz, Boaz and Jachin. . . ."

He's just a few feet from a rushing wall of hubcaps and car doors. "Hold on, pal. Not that way." I don't know who this is now, not really, but I take hold of the man's elbow and say, "I know a place we can go and be safe." I steer him away from the traffic. "I know the way, Gordon. Come with me, all right?" O

—for Tina M. Spell

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THE WEREWIFE'S TRADE-IN

"I'll get rid of you
and get a prince,"
said the Lady Who Lives with Beasts,
washing the blood
out of the utility sink.
It was what she said when one of them
hacked up prey in the bathtub,
or spit bones on the floor,
or sparred too rough
tooth & claw
near the glass & the breakables.

"A prince?"
The old beast laughed
like bones splintering between teeth.
"You'd have to spend the next thirty years
teaching him to act like a beast."

—William John Watkins

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MARGAUX

Walter Jon Williams

Walter Jon Williams's last work published in *Asimov's* was "Argonautica" (October 1999). Since then, he's won a Nebula award for short fiction, and appeared on The New York *Times* bestseller list. His next novel, *The Praxis*, will be out from Avon in October.

"Hey Earthgirl! I got someone for you to meet!"

Stoney was excited. He was almost *always* excited. He was one of Lamey's lieutenants, a boy who hijacked cargo that came over the sea to Maranic Port and sold it through Lamey's outlets in the Fabs. Stoney wore soft felt boots and a puffy padded jacket with rows of tiny little metal chimes that rang when he moved, and a hard round plastic hat without a brim, the clothes that all Lamey's linkboys wore when they wanted to be noticed.

Gredel came into the room on Lamey's arm. He had dressed her in a gown of short-haired kantaran leather set off with collar and cuffs of white satin, big clunky white ceramic jewelry inlaid with gold, shiny little plastic boots with nubbly surfaces and tall heels. The height of fashion, at least as far as the Fabs were concerned.

Lamey liked shopping for Gredel. He took her to the stores and bought her a new outfit two or three times each week.

Lamey had earned his name because he once had a defect that made him walk with a limp. It was something he'd had fixed as soon as he had the money, and when Gredel first met him, he glided along like a prince, putting each foot down with deliberate, exaggerated care, as if he were walking on rice paper and didn't want to tear it. Lamey was only twenty-five years old in Shaa measure, but already he ran a set of linkboys, and had linkages of his own that eventually ran up to some of the Peers responsible for running places like the Fabs. He had millions, all in cash stashed in various places, and three apartments, and half a dozen small stores through which he moved the material acquired by his crews.

He also had a seventeen-year-old girlfriend called Earthgirl.

Lamey had offered to set her up in an apartment, but Gredel still lived with Nelda, the woman who had mostly raised her since Gredel's mother had been sentenced to serve on the agrarian communes. Gredel wasn't sure why she stayed. Maybe it was because Gredel hoped she could protect Nelda against Antony, her husband—Gredel's earliest memories were of cowering in the dark while Antony raged outside the door, bellowing and smashing furniture. Or maybe Gredel stayed because once she moved

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into a place that Lamey bought her, she'd have to spend all her time there waiting for him to come see her. She wouldn't be able to leave for fear that he'd come by and find her gone and get angry; and she couldn't have her friends visit because they might be there when Lamey turned up and that would probably make him mad, too.

That was the kind of life Gredel's mother Ava had always led, waiting in some apartment somewhere for some man to turn up. That's why Ava had never been able to see her daughter when she wanted to. Gredel's father had apparently been caught at something, but it had been Ava who had paid for it, and Gredel's father who had skipped town. Gredel had seen him maybe twice since then.

Gredel wanted a different life for herself. She had no idea how to get it, but she was paying attention, and maybe some day she'd learn.

Gredel still attended school. Every afternoon, when Gredel left her school, she'd find Lamey in his car waiting for her, Lamey or one of his boys who would take Gredel to wherever Lamey was waiting.

Gredel's attending school was something Lamey found amusing. "I'm going around with a schoolgirl," he'd laugh, and sometimes he'd remind her to do her schoolwork when he had to leave with his boys on some errand or other. Not that he left her much time for schoolwork. Her grades had plunged to the point where she would probably get kicked out of school before she graduated.

Tonight, the eve of the Festival of Spring, Lamey had taken Gredel to a party at Panda's place. Panda was another of Lamey's linkboys, and he worked on the distribution end. He'd pointed Stoney and his crew at a warehouse full of wine imported from Cavado and pharmaceuticals awaiting shipment to a Fleet hospital on Spannan's ring. The imported wine was proving difficult to sell, there not being much of a market in the Fabs for something so select; but the pharmaceuticals were moving fast through Panda's outlets and everyone was in the mood to celebrate.

"Come on, Earthgirl!" Stoney urged. "You've got to meet her!"

A warning hummed through Gredel's nerves as she saw everyone at the party looking at her with eyes that glittered from more than whatever they'd been consuming earlier in the evening. There was an anticipation there in those eyes Gredel didn't like. So she dropped Lamey's arm and straightened—because she didn't want these people to see her afraid—and she walked to where Stoney waited.

"Earthgirl!" Stoney said. "This is Caro!" He was practically jumping up and down with excitement, and instead of looking where Stoney was pointing, Gredel just gave Stoney a long, cool glance, because he was just so outrageous this way.

When she turned her head, her first thought was, *She's beautiful.* And then the full impact of the other girl's face struck her.

"Ah. Ha," she said.

Caro looked at her with a ragged grin. She had long golden hair and green eyes and skin smooth as butter-cream, flawless. . . .

"It's your twin!" Stoney almost shouted. "Your secret twin sister!"

Gredel gaped while everyone laughed, but Caro just looked at her and said, "Are you really from Earth?"

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"No," Gredel said. "I'm from here."

"Help me build this pyramid."

Gredel shrugged. "Why not?" she said.

Caro wore a short dress and a battered jacket with black metal buckles and boots that came up past her knees—expensive stuff. She stood by the dining table carefully building a pyramid of crystal wine glasses. "I saw this done once," she said. "You pour the wine into the one glass on the top, and when it overflows it fills all the others. If you do it right, you fill all the glasses and you don't spill a drop."

Caro spoke with a kind of drawl, like Peers or rich people did when they made speeches or announcements on video.

"We're going to make a mess," Gredel predicted.

"That's all right, too," Caro shrugged.

When the pyramid was completed, Caro got Stoney to start opening bottles. It was the wine his crew had stolen from the warehouse in Maranic Port, and it was a kind of bright silver in color, and filled the glasses like liquid mercury.

Caro tried to pour carefully, but, as Gredel predicted, she made a terrible mess, the precious wine bubbling across the tabletop and over onto the carpet. Caro seemed to find this funny. At length, all the glasses were brimming full, and she put down the bottle and called everyone over to drink. They took glasses and cheered and drank. Laughter and clinking glasses rang in the air. The glasses were so full that the carpet got another bath.

Caro took one glass for herself and pushed another into Gredel's hand, then took a second glass for herself and led Gredel to the sofa. Gredel sipped cautiously at the wine—there was something subtle and indefinable about the taste, something that made her think of the park in spring, the way the trees and flowers had a delicate freshness to them. She'd never tasted any wine like it before.

The taste was more seductive than she wanted anything with alcohol to be. She didn't take a second sip.

"So," Caro said, "are we related?"

"I don't think so," Gredel said.

Caro swallowed half the contents of a glass in one go. "Your dad was never on Zanshaa? I can almost guarantee my dad was never here."

"I get my looks from my Ma, and she's never been anywhere," Gredel said. Then, surprised, "You're from Zanshaa?"

Caro gave a little twitch of her lips, followed by a shrug. Interpreting this as a yes, Gredel asked,

"What do your parents do?"

"They got executed," Caro said.

Gredel hesitated. "I'm sorry," she said. Caro's parents were linked, obviously. No wonder she was hanging with this crowd.

"Me, too." Caro said it with a brave little laugh, but she gulped down the remains of the wine in her first glass, then took a sip from the second. She looked up at Gredel.

"You heard of them maybe? The Sula family?"

Gredel tried to think of any of the linkages with that name, but couldn't. "Sorry, no," she said.

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"That's all right," Caro said. "The Sulas were big on Zanshaa, but out here in the provinces they wouldn't mean much." Her eyes narrowed. "Why do they call you Earthgirl?"

Gredel put on her Earth accent. "Because I can talk like I'm from Earth, darling. I do the voice."

Caro laughed. She finished her second glass of wine, then got two more from the pyramid and drank them, then reached for Gredel's. "You going to drink that?"

"I don't drink much."

"Why not?"

Gredel hesitated. "I don't like being drunk."

Caro shrugged. "That's fair." She drank Gredel's glass, then put it with the others on the side table. "I don't like being drunk," she said, as if she were making up her mind right then. "But I don't dislike it either. What I don't like," she said carefully, "is standing still. Not moving. Not changing. I get bored fast, and I don't like *quiet*."

"In that case, you've come to the right place," Gredel said.

Her nose is more pointed, Gredel thought. And her chin is different. She doesn't look like me, not really.

I bet I'd look good in that jacket, though.

"So do you live around here someplace?" Gredel asked.

Caro shook her head. "Maranic Town."

"I wish I lived in Maranic."

Caro looked at her in surprise. "Why?"

"Because it's . . . not *here*."

"Maranic is a hole. It's not something to wish for. If you're going to wish, wish for Zanshaa. Or Sandamar. Or Esley."

"Have you been to those places?" Gredel asked. She almost hoped the answer was no, because she knew she'd never get anywhere like that, that maybe she'd get to Maranic Town, *if* she was lucky.

"I was there when I was little," Caro said.

"I wish I lived in Byzantium," Gredel said.

Caro gave her a look again. "Where's that?"

"Earth. Terra."

"Terra's a hole," Caro said.

"I'd still like to go there."

"It's probably better than Maranic Town," Caro decided.

Someone programmed some dance music, and Lamey came to dance with Gredel. A few years ago, he hadn't been able to walk right, but now he was a good dancer, and Gredel enjoyed dancing with him, responding to his changing moods in the fast dances, molding her body to his when the beat slowed down.

Caro also danced with one boy or another, but Gredel saw that she couldn't dance at all, just bounced up and down while her partner maneuvered her around.

After a while, Lamey went to talk business with Ibrahim, one of his boys who thought he knew someone in Maranic who could distribute the stolen wine, and Gredel found herself on the couch with Caro again.

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"Your nose is different," Caro said.

"I know."

"But you're prettier than I am."

This was the opposite of what Gredel had been thinking. People were always telling her she was beautiful, and she had to believe they saw her that way, but when she looked in the mirror she saw nothing but a vast collection of flaws.

A girl shrieked in another room, and there was a crash of glass. Suddenly Caro's mood changed completely: she glared toward the other room as if she hated everyone there.

"Time to change the music," she said. She dug in her pocket and pulled out a med injector. She looked at the display, dialed a number, and put the injector to her throat, over the carotid. Little flashes of alarm pulsed through Gredel.

"What's in there?" she asked.

"What do you care?" Caro snarled. Her eyes snapped green sparks.

She pressed the trigger, and, an instant later, the fury faded, and a drowsy smile came to Caro's lips. "Now that's better," she said. "Panda's got the real goods, all right."

"Tell me about Zanshaa," Gredel said.

Caro lazily shook her head. "No. Nothing but bad memories there."

"Then tell me about Esley."

"Sure. What I can remember."

Caro talked about Esley's black granite peaks, with a white spindrift of snow continually blowing off them in the high perpetual wind, and the shaggy Yormak who lived there, tending their equally shaggy cattle. She described glaciers pouring in ageless slow motion down mountain valleys, high meadows covered with fragrant star flowers, chill lakes so clear that you could see all the way to the bottom.

"Of course, I was only at that mountain resort for a few weeks," Caro added. "The rest of the planet might be burning desert for all I know."

Lamey came back for more dancing, and when Gredel returned to the sofa Caro was unconscious, the med injector in her hand. She seemed to be breathing all right, though, lying asleep with a smile on her face. After a while, Panda came over and tried to grope her, but Gredel slapped his hands away.

"What's your problem?" he asked.

"Don't mess with my sister when she's passed out," Gredel told him. He laughed, not exactly in a nice way, but he withdrew.

Caro was still asleep when the party ended. Gredel made Lamey help her carry Caro to his car, and then got him to drive to Maranic Town to her apartment. "What if she doesn't wake up long enough to tell us where it is?" Lamey complained.

"Whatever she took will wear off sooner or later."

"What if it's next week?" But he drove off anyway, heading for Maranic, while Gredel sat with Caro in the back seat and tried to wake her up. Caro woke long enough to murmur the fact that she lived in the Volta Apartments. Lamey got lost on the way there, and wandered into a Torminel neighborhood. The nocturnal Torminel were in the middle of

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their active cycle, and Lamey got angry at the way they stared at him with their huge eyes as he wandered their streets.

Lamey was furious by the time he found the apartment building. He opened the passenger door and practically dragged Caro out of the car onto the sidewalk. Gredel scrambled out of the car and tried to get one of Caro's arms over her shoulders so she could help Caro get to her feet.

A doorman came scrambling out of the building. "Has something happened to Lady Sula?" he demanded.

Lamey looked at him in surprise. The doorman stared at Gredel, then at Caro, astonished by the resemblance. But Gredel looked at Caro.

Lady Sula? Gredel thought.

Her twin was a Peer.

Ah, she thought. *Ha.*

Lady Sula?

She wasn't even Lady Caro, she was Lady *Sula.* She wasn't just any Peer, she was head of the whole Sula clan.

Lamey's fury faded away quickly—it did that, came and went with lightning speed—and he picked Caro up in his arms and carried her to the elevator while the doorman fussed around him. When they arrived on the top floor, the doorman opened Caro's apartment, and Lamey walked in as if he paid the rent himself and carried Caro to her bedroom. There he put Caro down on her bed, and had Gredel draw off the tall boots while Lamey covered her with a comforter.

Gredel had never admired Lamey so much as at that moment. He behaved with a strange delicacy, as if he were a Peer himself, some lord commander of the Fleet cleaning up after a confidential mission.

The doorman wouldn't let them stay. On the way out, Gredel saw that Caro's apartment was a terrible mess, with clothes in piles and the tables covered with glasses, bottles, and dirty dishes.

"I want you to come back here tomorrow," Lamey said as he started the car. "I want you to become Caro Sula's best friend."

Gredel fully intended this, but she wondered why Lamey's thoughts echoed her own. "Why?"

"Peers are rich," Lamey said simply. "Maybe we can get some of that and maybe we can't. But even more than the money, Peers are also the keys to things, and maybe Caro can open some doors for us. Even if it's just the door to her bank account, it's worth a try."

It was very, very late, almost dawn, but Lamey wanted to take Gredel to one of his apartments. There they had a brisk five minutes' sex, hardly worth taking off her clothes for as far as Gredel was concerned, and then Lamey took Gredel home.

As soon as she walked in the door, she knew Antony was back—he'd been gone for four months, working in another town, and Gredel had got used to walking in the door without fear. Now the apartment smelled different, a blend of beer and tobacco and human male and fear. Gredel took off her boots at the door so she wouldn't wake him, and crept in silence to

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her bed. Despite the hour, she lay awake for some time, thinking of keys and doors opening.

Lamey didn't know what he wanted from Caro, not quite. He was operating on an instinct that told him Caro could be useful, give him connections, links that would move him upward in the Fabs. Gredel had much the same intuition where Caro was concerned, but she wanted Caro for other things. Gredel didn't want to stay in the Fabs. Caro might show her how to do that, how to behave, perhaps, or how to dress, how to move up, and maybe not just out of the Fabs but off Spannan altogether, loft out of the ring station on a tail of fire to Esley or Zanshaa or Earth, to a glittering life that she felt hovering around her, a kind of potential waiting to be born, but that she couldn't quite imagine.

She woke just before noon and put on her robe to shower and use the toilet. The sounds of the Spring Festival zephyrball game blared from the front room, where Antony was watching the video. Gredel finished her business in the bathroom and went back into her room to dress. When she finished putting on her clothes and her makeup, she brushed her hair for a long time, delaying the moment when she would leave her sanctum to face Antony, but when she realized what she was doing, she got angry at herself and put the brush down, then put her money in the pocket of her jacket and walked through the door.

Antony sat on the sagging old sofa watching the game on the video wall. The remains of a sandwich sat on a plate next to him. He was a man of average height but built powerfully, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest and long arms with big hands. He looked like a slab on legs. Iron-grey hair fringed his bald head, and his eyes were tiny and set in a permanent suspicious glare.

He wasn't drinking, Gredel saw, and felt some of her tension ease.

"Hi, Antony," she said as she walked for the apartment door.

He looked at her with his glaring black eyes. "Where you going dressed like that?"

"To see a friend."

"The friend who bought you those clothes?"

"No. Someone else." She made herself stop walking and face him.

His lips twitched in a sneer. "Nelda says you're whoring now for some linkboy. Just like your mother."

Anger flamed along Gredel's veins, but she clamped it down and said, "I've never whored. Never. Not once."

"Not for money, maybe," Antony said. "But look at those clothes on you. And that jewelry." Gredel felt herself flush. Antony returned his attention to the game. "Better you sell that tail of yours for money," he muttered. "Then you could contribute to your upkeep around here."

So you could steal it, Gredel thought, but didn't say it. She headed for the door, and just before it swung shut behind her, she heard Antony's parting shot. "You better not take out that implant! You get pregnant, you're out of this place! I'm not looking after another kid that isn't my own!"

Like he'd ever looked after any kid.

Gredel left the building with her fists clenched and a blaze of fury kin-

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dled in her eyes. Kids playing in the front hall took one look at her and got out of her way.

It wasn't until the train was halfway to Maranic Town that the anger finally ebbed to a normal background buzz, and Gredel began to wonder if Caro would be at home, if she would even remember meeting her the previous night.

Gredel found the Volta Apartments quickly now that she knew where it was. The doorman—it was a different doorman this time—opened the door for her and showed her right to the elevator. Clearly he thought she was Caro. "Thank you," Gredel smiled, trying to drawl out the words the way a Peer would.

She had to knock loudly, several times, before Caro came to the door. Caro was still in her short dress from the previous night, and tights, and bare feet. Her hair was disordered, and there was a smear of mascara on one cheek. Her slitted eyes opened wide as she saw Gredel at the door.

"Earthgirl," she said. "Hi."

"The doorman thought I was you. I came over to see if you were all right."

Caro opened the door and flapped her arms, as if to say, *I am as you see me.* "Come in," she said, and turned to walk toward the kitchen.

The apartment was still a mess, and the air smelled stale. Caro went to the sink in the little kitchen and poured herself a glass of water.

"My mouth tastes like cheese," she said. "The kind with the veins in it. I hate that kind of cheese."

She drank her water while Gredel walked around the apartment. She felt strangely reluctant to touch anything, as if it was a fantasy that might dissolve if she put a finger on it.

"So," she said finally. "You want to go and do something?"

Caro finished her water and put down her glass on a counter already covered with dirty glasses. "I need some coffee first," she said. "Would you mind going to the café on the corner and getting some for me while I change?"

"What about the coffee maker?" Gredel asked.

Caro blinked at the machine as if she were seeing it for the first time. "I don't know how to work it," she said.

"I'll show you."

"I never learned how to do kitchen stuff," Caro said, as she made way for Gredel in the kitchen. "Till I came here, we always had servants. I had servants *here,* but I called the last one a cow and threw her out."

"What's a cow?" Gredel asked.

"They're ugly and fat and stupid. Like Berthe when I fired her."

Gredel found coffee in a cupboard and began preparing the coffee maker. "Do you *eat* cows, or what?" she asked.

"Yeah, they give meat. And milk, too."

"We have vashes for that. And zieges. And swine and bison, but they only give meat."

Gredel made coffee for them both. Caro took her cup into the bathroom with her, and after a while, Gredel heard the shower start to run. She sipped her coffee as she wandered around the apartment—the rooms were nice, but not *that* nice, Lamey had places just as good, though not in

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such an exclusive building as this. There was a view of the Iola River two streets away, but it wasn't that nice a view, there were buildings in the way, and the window glass was dirty.

Then, because she couldn't stand the mess any longer, Gredel began to pick up the scattered clothes and fold them. She finished that and was putting the dirty dishes in the washer when Caro appeared, dressed casually in soft wool pantaloons, a high-necked blouse, and a little vest with gold buttons and lots of pockets slashed one on top of the other. Caro looked around in surprise.

"You cleaned up!"

"A little."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I didn't have anything else to do." Gredel came into the front room. She looked down at one of the piles of clothing, put her hand down on the soft pile of a sweater she had just folded and placed neatly on the back of a sofa. "You have some nice things," she said.

"That's from Yormak cattle. They have wonderful wool." She eyed Gredel's clothing. "What you're wearing, that's—that's all right."

"Lamey bought it for me."

Caro laughed. "Might have known a man picked that."

What's wrong with it? Gredel wanted to ask. It was what everyone was wearing, only top quality. These weren't clothes hijacked at Maranic Port, they were bought in a *store.*

Caro took Gredel's arm. "Let's get some breakfast," she said, "and then I'll take you shopping."

The doorman stared comically as Caro and Gredel stepped out of the elevator. Caro introduced Gredel as her twin sister Margaux from Earth, and Gredel greeted the doorman in her Earth accent. The doorman bowed deeply as they swept out.

An hour later, in the restaurant, Gredel was surprised when Caro asked her to pay for their meal. "My allowance comes first of the month," she said. "And this month's money supply is *gone.* This café won't run a tab for me."

"Weren't we going shopping?"

Caro grinned. "Clothes I can buy on credit."

They went to one of the arcades where exclusive shops sheltered under a long series of graceful arches of polymerous resin, the arches translucent but grown in different colors, so that the vaulted ceiling of each glowed with subtle tones that merged and flowed and blended. Caro introduced Gredel as her sister, and laughed when Gredel used her Earth accent. Gredel was called Lady Margaux and surrounded by swarms of clerks and floorwalkers, and she was both surprised and flattered by the attention. This is what it was like to be a Peer.

If she'd been merely Gredel, the staff would have been there all right, but following her around to make sure she didn't steal.

The arcades didn't serve just Terrans, so there were Torminel there, and Naxids, and some pleasure-loving Cree who wandered through the shops burbling in their musical voices. It was unusual for Gredel to see so many non-humans in one place, since she rarely had any reason to leave

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the Terran parts of the Fabs. But the Peers, Gredel concluded, were almost a species of their own. They had more in common with each other than they had with other folk.

Caro bought an outfit for herself and two for Gredel, first a luxurious gown with a cape so long it dragged on the floor, and next a pajama-like lounging outfit. Gredel had no idea where she would ever wear such things. Caro nodded at the lounging suit. "Made of worm spit," she said.

"Sorry?" Gredel said, startled.

"Worm spit. They call it 'silk.'"

Gredel had heard of silk, and she touched the fabric with a new respect. "Do you think it came from Earth?" she asked.

"I doubt it." Dismissively. "Earth's a hole. My mother was there on government service, and she told me."

Caro bought everything on credit. Gredel noticed that she signed only *Sula,* leaving out her first name and the honorific *Lady.* She seemed to carry a tab on every store in the arcade. When Gredel thanked her for the presents, Caro said, "You can pay me back by buying dinner."

"I don't think I can afford that," Gredel said doubtfully.

Caro laughed. "Guess we better learn to eat worm spit," she said.

Gredel was intrigued by the way everyone lined up to give Caro credit. "They know I'm good for it," Caro explained. "They know I'll have the money eventually."

"When?"

"When I'm twenty-two. That's when the funds mature." She laughed again. "But those people still won't get paid. I'll be off the planet by then, in the Fleet, and they can chase me through space if they like."

Gredel was intrigued by this, too. There tended to be serious consequences in the Fabs for people who didn't pay their debts. Maybe this, too, was different for Peers.

"So this is money your parents left you?" Gredel asked.

Caro looked dubious. "I'm not sure. My parents were caught in some kind of scheme to swindle government suppliers out of a lot of money, and they lost everything—estates, money—" She tapped her neck significantly. "Everything. I got sent to live with Jacob Biswas in Blue Lakes." This was an exclusive area outside of Maranic Town. "The Biswas clan were clients of the Sulas, and Dad got Biswas the job of Assistant Port Administrator here. I'm not sure if the money is something Dad got to him, or whether it came from my dad's clients or friends, but it's in a bank on Spannan's Ring, and the interest comes to me here every month."

"You don't live with Biswas anymore, though. Did he leave Spannan?"

"No, he's still here. But he got divorced and remarried, and the new wife and I didn't get along—we were fighting every day, and poor old Jacob couldn't take it any more, so he got me the place in the Volta until it was time for me to join the Fleet."

Caro went on to explain that her family was forbidden to be in the civil service for three generations, both as punishment for what her parents had done and to minimize the chance to steal. But as a Peer, she had an automatic ticket to one of the Fleet academies, and so it had been planned for her to go there.

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"I don't know," Caro said, shaking her head. "I can't see myself in the Fleet. Taking orders, wearing uniforms . . . under all that discipline. I think I'd go crazy in ten days."

The Fleet, Gredel thought. The Fleet could carry you away from Spannan, through the wormhole gates to the brilliant worlds beyond. Zanshaa, Esley, Earth . . . the vision was dazzling. For that, she could put up with uniforms.

"I'd do it in a second," Gredel said.

Caro gave her a look. "Why?"

Gredel thought she may as well emphasize the practical advantages. "You get food and a place to sleep. Medical and dental care. And they *pay* you for it."

Caro gave a disdainful snort. "*You* do it, then."

"I would if I could."

Caro made a disgusted noise. "So why don't you? You could enlist."

"They wouldn't let me. My mother has a criminal record."

The Fleet had their pick of recruits: there were plenty of people who wanted those three free meals per day. They checked the background of everyone who applied.

Unless, Gredel thought, someone she knew could pull strings. A Peer, say.

They took a taxi back to Caro's apartment, but when the driver started to pull up to the curb, Caro ducked into the back seat, pulled a bewildered Gredel down atop her, and shouted at the driver to keep going.

"What's the matter?" Gredel asked.

"A collector. Someone come to get money from me. The doorman usually chases them off, but this one's really persistent."

Apparently, living on credit wasn't as convenient as Caro let on.

The driver let them off in the alley behind the apartment building. There was a loading dock there, and Caro's codes opened the door. There were little motorized carts in the entryway, for use when people moved in furniture or other heavy belongings.

They took the freight elevator to Caro's floor and looked for something to eat. There wasn't much, just biscuits and an old piece of cheese. "Have you got food at your place?" Caro asked.

Gredel hesitated. Her reluctance was profound. "Food," she said, "but we've got Antony, too."

"And who's that?"

Gredel told her. Caro's disgusted look returned. "He comes near me," she said, "I'll kick him in the balls."

"That wouldn't stop him for long," Gredel said, and shivered. "He'd still slap your face off."

"We'll see." Caro's lip curled again, defiant.

"I'm serious. You don't want to get Antony mad. I bet even Lamey's boys would have a hard time with him."

Caro shook her head. "This is crazy," she laughed. "You know anyone who could buy us some food?"

"Well. There's Lamey."

"He's your boyfriend, right? The tall one?"

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"He carried you up here last night."

"So I *already* owe him," Caro laughed. "Will he mind if I mooch dinner off him? I'll pay him back, first of the month."

Gredel called Lamey on her phone, and he was amused by their dilemma and said he'd be there soon.

"So tell me about Lamey," Caro said while they waited.

So Gredel told Caro about Lamey's business. "He's linked, you know? He knows people, and he moves stuff around. From the Port, from other places. Makes it available to people at good prices. When people can't get loans, he loans them money."

"Aren't the clans' patrons supposed to do that?"

"Sometimes they will. But, you know, those mid-level clans, they're in a lot of businesses themselves, or their friends and allies are. So they're not going to loan money for someone to go into competition with them. And once the new businesses start, they have to be protected, you know, against the people who are already in that business, so Lamey and his people do that, too."

"It's the Peers who are supposed to protect people," Caro said.

"Caro," Gredel said, "you're the first Peer I've ever seen outside of a video. Peers don't come to places like the Fabs."

Caro gave a cynical grin. "So Lamey just does *good* things, right? He's never hurt anybody, he just helps people."

Gredel hesitated. They were entering the area of things she tried not to think about. She thought about the boy Moseley, the dreadful dull squelching thud as Lamey's boot went into him. The way her own head rang after Lamey slapped her that time.

"Sure," she said finally, "he's hurt people. People who stole from him; mostly. But he's really not bad," she added quickly, "he's not one of the violent ones, he's *smart.* He uses his intelligence."

"Uh-huh," Caro said. "So has he used his . . . *intelligence* . . . on you?"

Gredel felt herself flush. "A few times," she said quickly. "He's got a temper. But he's always sweet when he cools down, and buys me things."

"Uh-huh," Caro said.

Gredel tried not to bristle at Caro's attitude. Hitting was what boyfriends *did,* it was normal; the point was whether they felt sorry afterward.

"Do you love him?" Caro asked.

Gredel hesitated again. "Maybe," she said.

"I hope at least he's good in bed."

Gredel shrugged. "He's all right." Sex seemed to be expected of her, because she was thought to be beautiful and because she went with older boys who had money. For all that it had never been as pleasurable as she'd been led to expect, it was nevertheless pleasurable enough so that she never really wanted to quit.

"Lamey's too young to be good in bed," Caro declared. "You need an older man to show you what sex is really about." Her eyes sparkled, and she gave a diabolical giggle. "Like my Sergei. He was really the best! He showed me *everything* about sex."

Gredel blinked. "Who was Sergei?"

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"Remember I told you that Jake Biswas remarried? Well, his wife's sister was married to Sergei. He and I met at the wedding and fell for each other—we were always sneaking away to be together. That's what all the fighting in the family was about. That's why I had to move to Maranic Town."

"How much older was he?"

"In his forties somewhere."

Black, instant hatred descended on Gredel. She could have torn Sergei to ribbons with her nails, with her teeth.

"That's sick," she said. "That man is disgusting!"

Caro gave a cynical laugh. "I wouldn't talk if I were you," she said. "How old is Lamey? What kind of scenes does *he* get you into?"

Gredel felt as if Caro's words had slapped her across the face. Caro gave her a smirk.

"Right," she said. "We're models of stability and mental health, we are."

Gredel decided to change the subject.

Caro's mood had sweetened by the time Lamey turned up. She thanked him for taking her home the previous night, and took them both to a restaurant so exclusive that Caro had to give a thumbprint in order to enter. There were no real dinners on the menu, just a variety of small plates that everyone at the table shared. Gredel had never heard of some of the ingredients. Some of the dishes were wonderful, some weren't. Some were simply incomprehensible.

Caro and Lamey got along well, to Gredel's relief. Caro filled the air with vivacious talk, and Lamey joked and deferred to her. Toward the end of the meal he remembered something, and reached into his pocket. Gredel's nerves tingled as she recognized a med injector.

"Panda asked me if you wanted any more of the endorphin," Lamey said.

"I don't have any money, remember?" Caro said.

Lamey gave an elaborate shrug. "I'll put it on your tab."

Don't, Gredel wanted to shout.

But Caro gave a pleased, catlike smile, and reached for the injector in Lamey's hand.

Gredel and Caro spent a lot of time together after that. Partly because Lamey wanted it, but also because Gredel found that she liked Caro, and she liked learning from her. She studied how Caro dressed, how she talked, how she moved. And Caro enjoyed dressing Gredel up like one of her dolls, and teaching her to walk and talk as if she were Lady Margaux, the sister of a Peer. Gredel worked on her accent till her speech was a letter-perfect imitation of Caro's. Caro couldn't do voices the way Gredel could, and Gredel's Earthgirl voice always made her laugh.

Gredel was learning the things that might get her out of the Fabs.

Caro enjoyed teaching her. Maybe, Gredel thought, this was because Caro really didn't have much to do. She'd left school, because she was a Peer and would get into the academy whether she had good marks or not, and she didn't seem to have any friends in Maranic Town. Sometimes friends from Blue Lakes came to visit her—usually a pack of girls all at

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once—but all their talk was about people and events in their school, and Gredel could tell that Caro got bored with that fast.

"I wish Sergei would call," Caro said. But Sergei never did. And Caro refused to call Sergei. "It's his move, not mine," she said, her eyes turning hard.

Caro got bored easily. And that was dangerous, because when Caro got bored, she wanted to change the music. Sometimes that meant shopping or going to a club, but it could also mean drinking a couple of bottles of wine or a bottle of brandy, or firing endorphin or Benzedrine into her carotid from the med injector, or sometimes all of the above. It was the endorphins she liked best, though.

The drugs weren't illegal, but the supply was controlled in various ways, and they were expensive. The black market provided pharmaceuticals at more reasonable prices, and without a paper or money trail. The drugs the linkboys sold weren't just for fun, either: Nelda got Gredel black market antivirals when she was sick, and fast-healers once when she broke her leg, and saved herself the expense of supporting a doctor and a pharmacy.

When Caro changed the music, she became a spiky, half-feral creature, a tangled ligature of taut-strung nerves and overpowering impulse. She would careen from one scene to the next, from party to club to bar, having a frenzied good time one minute, spitting out vicious insults at perfect strangers the next.

At the first of the month, Gredel urged Caro to pay Lamey what she owed him. Caro just shrugged, but Gredel insisted. "This isn't like the debts you run up at the boutique."

Caro gave Gredel a narrow-eyed look that made her nervous, because she recognized it as the prelude to fury. "What do you mean?"

"When you don't pay Lamey, things happen."

"Like what." Contemptuously.

"Like—" Gredel hesitated. "Like what happened to Moseley."

Her stomach turned over at the memory. "Moseley ran a couple of Lamey's stores, you know, where he sells the stuff he gets. And Lamey found out that Moseley was skimming the profits. So—" She remembered the way Lamey screamed at Moseley, the way his boys held Moseley while Lamey smashed him in the face and body. The way that Lamey kept kicking him even after Moseley fell unconscious to the floor, the thuds of the boots going home.

"So what happened to Moseley?" Caro asked.

"I think he died." Gredel spoke the words past the knot in her throat. "The boys won't talk to me about it. No one ever saw him again. Panda runs those stores now."

"And Lamey would do that to *me?*" Caro asked. It clearly took effort to wrap her mind around the idea of being vulnerable to someone like Lamey.

Gredel hesitated again. "Maybe you just shouldn't give him the chance. He's unpredictable."

"Fine," Caro said. "Give him the money then."

Caro went to her computer and gave Gredel a credit chit for the money, which Gredel then carried to Lamey. He gave the plastic tab a bemused

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look—he was in a cash-only business—and then asked Gredel to take it back to Caro and have it cashed. When Gredel returned to Caro's apartment the next day, Caro was hung over and didn't want to be bothered, so she gave Gredel the codes to her cash account.

It was as easy as that.

Gredel looked at the deposit made the previous day and took a breath. Eight hundred forty zeniths, enough to keep Nelda and her assortment of children for a year, with enough left over for Antony to get drunk every night. And Caro got this every *month.*

Gredel started looking after Caro's money, seeing that at least some of the creditors were appeased, that there was food in the kitchen. She cleaned the place, too, tidied the clothes Caro scattered everywhere, saw that the laundry was sent out, and, when it returned, was put away. Caro was amused by it all. "When I'm in the Fleet, you can join, too," she said. "I'll make you a servant or something."

Hope burned in Gredel's heart. "I hope so," she said. "But you'll have to pull some strings to get me in—I mean, with my mother's record and everything."

"I'll get you in," Caro assured.

Lamey was disappointed when Gredel told him about Caro's finances. "Eight hundred forty," he muttered, "it's hardly worth stealing." He rolled onto his back in the bed—they were in one of his apartments—and frowned at the ceiling.

"People have been killed for a lot less than that," Gredel said. "For the price of a bottle of cheap wine."

Lamey's blue eyes gave her a sharp look. "I'm not talking about killing anybody," he said. "I'm just saying it's not worth *getting killed over,* because that's what's likely to happen if you steal from a Peer. It won't be worth trying until she's twenty-two, when she gets the whole inheritance, and by then she'll be in the Fleet." He sighed. "I wish she were in the Fleet now, assigned to the Port. We might be able to make use of her, get some Fleet supplies."

"I don't want to steal from her," Gredel said.

Lamey fingered his chin thoughtfully and went on as if he hadn't heard. "What you do, see, is get a bank account in *her* name, but with *your* thumbprint. Then you transfer Caro's money over to your account, and from there you turn it into cash and walk off into the night." He smiled. "Should be easy."

"I thought you said it wasn't worth it," Gredel said.

"Not for eight hundred it isn't," Lamey said. He gave a laugh. "I'm just trying to work out a way of getting my investment back."

Gredel was relieved that Lamey wasn't really intending to steal Caro's money. She didn't want to be a thief, and she especially didn't want to steal from a friend like Caro.

"She doesn't seem to have any useful contacts here." Lamey continued thinking aloud. "Find out about these Biswas people. They might be good for *something.*"

Gredel agreed. The request seemed harmless enough.

Gredel spent most of her nights away from Nelda's now, either with

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Lamey or sleeping at Caro's place. That was good, because things at Nelda's were grim. Antony looked as if he were settling in for a long stay. He was sick, something about his liver, and he couldn't get work. Sometimes Nelda had fresh bruises or cuts on her face. Sometimes the other kids did. And sometimes when Gredel came home at night Antony was there, passed out on the sofa, a bottle of gin in his hand. She took off her shoes and walked past him quietly, glaring her hatred as she passed him, and she would think how easy it would be to hurt Antony then, to pick up the bottle and smash Antony in the face with it, smash him until he couldn't hurt anyone ever again.

Once Gredel came home and found Nelda in tears. Antony had slapped her around and taken the rent money, for the second time in a row. "We're going to be evicted," Nelda whispered hoarsely. "They're going to throw us all out."

"No they're not," Gredel said firmly. She went to Lamey and explained the situation and begged him for the money. "I'll never ask you for anything ever again," she promised.

Lamey listened thoughtfully, then reached into his wallet and handed her a hundred-zenith note. "This take care of it?" he asked.

Gredel reached for the note, hesitated. "More than enough," she said. "I don't want to take that much."

Lamey took her hand and put the note into it. His blue eyes looked into hers. "Take it and welcome," he said. "Buy yourself something nice with the rest."

Gratitude flooded Gredel's eyes. Tears fell down her cheeks. "Thank you," she said. "I know I don't deserve it."

"Of course you do," Lamey said. "You deserve the best, Earthgirl." He kissed her, his lips coming away salty. "Now you take this to the building agent, right? You don't give it to Nelda, because she might give it away again."

"I'll do that right away," Gredel said.

"And—" His eyes turned solemn. "Does Antony need taking care of? Or need encouragement to leave? You know what I mean."

Gredel shrank from the idea. "No," she said. "No—he won't stay long."

"You remember it's an option, right?" She made herself nod in answer.

Gredel took the money to the agent, a scowling little woman who had an office in the building and who smelled of cabbage and onions. She insisted on a receipt for the two months' rent, which the woman gave grudgingly, and as Gredel walked away she thought about Lamey and how this meant Lamey loved her.

Too bad he's going to die. The thought formed in her mind unbidden.

The worst part was that she knew it was true.

People like Lamey didn't survive for long. There weren't many *old* linkboys—that's why they weren't called link*men*. Sooner or later they were caught and killed. And the people they loved—their wives, their lovers, their children—paid as well, with a term on the labor farms like Ava, or with their own execution.

The point was reinforced a few days later, when Stoney was caught hijacking a cargo of fuel cells in Maranic Port. His trial was over two weeks

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later, and he was executed the next week. Because stealing private property was a crime against common law, not against the Praxis that governed the empire, he wasn't subjected to the tortures reserved for those who transgressed against the ultimate law, but simply strapped into a chair and garroted.

The execution was broadcast on the video channel reserved for punishments, and Lamey made his boys watch it. "To make them more careful," he said simply.

Gredel didn't watch. She went to Caro's instead and surprised herself by helping Caro drink a bottle of wine. Caro was delighted at this lapse on Gredel's part, and was her most charming all night, thanking Gredel effusively for everything Gredel had done for her. Gredel left with the wine singing in her veins. She had rarely felt so good.

The euphoria lasted until she entered Nelda's apartment. Antony was in full cry. A chair lay in pieces on the floor and Nelda had a cut above her eye that wept red tears across her face. Gredel froze in the door as she came in, and then tried to slip toward her room without attracting Antony's attention.

No such luck. Antony lunged toward her, grabbed her blouse by its shoulder. She felt the fabric tear. "Where's the money?" Antony shouted. "Where's the money you get by selling your tail?"

Gredel held out her pocketbook in trembling hands. "Here!" she said. "Take it!"

It was clear enough what was going on, it was Antony Scenario Number One. He needed cash for a drink, and he'd already taken everything Nelda had.

Antony grabbed the pocketbook, poured coins into his hand. Gredel could smell the juniper scent of the gin reeking off his pores. He looked at the coins dumbly, then threw the pocketbook to the floor and put the money in his pocket.

"I'm going to put you on the street myself, right now," he said, and seized her wrist in one huge hand. "I can get more money for you than this."

"No!" Gredel filled with terror, tried to pull away.

Anger blazed in Antony's eyes. He drew back his other hand.

Gredel felt the impact not on her flesh but in her bones. Her teeth snapped together and her heels went out from under her and she sat on the floor.

Then Nelda was there, screaming, her hands clutching Antony's forearm as she tried to keep him from hitting Gredel again. "Don't hit the child!" she wailed.

"Stupid bitch!" Antony growled, and turned to punch Nelda in the face. "Don't ever step between me and her again!"

Turning his back was Antony's big mistake. Anger blazed in Gredel, an all-consuming blowtorch annihilating fury that sent her lunging for the nearest weapon, a furniture leg that had been broken off when Antony had smashed a chair in order to underscore one of his rhetorical points. Gredel kicked off her heels and rose to her feet and swung the chair leg two-handed for Antony's head.

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Nelda gaped at her, her mouth an O, and wailed again. Antony took this as a warning and started to turn, but it was too late. The wooden chair leg caught him in the temple, and he fell to one knee. The chair leg, which was made of compressed dedger fiber, had broken raggedly, and the splintery end gouged his flesh.

Gredel gave a shriek powered by seventeen years of pure, suppressed hatred, and swung again. There was a solid crack as the chair leg connected with Antony's bald skull, and the big man dropped to the floor like a bag of rocks. Gredel dropped her knees onto his barrel chest and swung again and again. She remembered the sound that Lamey's boots made going into Moseley and wanted badly to make those sounds come from Antony. The ragged end of the chair leg tore long ribbons out of Antony's flesh. Blood splashed the floor and walls.

She only stopped when Nelda wrapped Gredel's arms with her own and hauled her off Antony. Gredel turned to swing at Nelda, and only stopped when she saw the older woman's tears.

Antony was making a bubbling sound as he breathed. A slow river of blood poured out of his mouth onto the floor. "What do we do?" Nelda wailed as she turned little helpless circles on the floor. "What do we do?"

Gredel knew the answer to the question perfectly well. She got her phone out of her pocketbook and went to her room and called Lamey. He was there in twenty minutes with Panda and three other boys. He looked at the wrecked room, at Antony lying on the floor, at Gredel standing over the man with the bloody chair leg in her hand.

"What do you want done?" he asked Gredel. "We could put him on a train, I suppose. Or in the river."

"No!" Nelda jumped between Antony and Lamey. Tears brimmed from her eyes as she turned to Gredel. "Put him on the train. Please, honey, please."

"On the train," Gredel repeated to Lamey.

"We'll wake him up long enough to tell him not to come back," Lamey said. He and his boys picked up Antony's heavy body and dragged it toward the door.

"Where's the freight elevator?" Lamey asked.

"I'll show you." Gredel went with them to the elevator. The tenants were working people who went to bed at a reasonable hour, and the building was silent at night and the halls empty. Lamey's boys panted for breath as they hauled the heavy, inert carcass with its heavy bones and solid muscle. They reached the freight elevator doors, and the boys dumped Antony on the floor while they caught their breath.

"Lamey," Gredel said.

Lamey looked at her. "Yes?"

She looked up at him, into his accepting blue eyes.

"Put him in the river," she said. "Just make sure he doesn't come up."

Lamey looked at her, a strange silent sympathy in his eyes, and he put his arm around her and kissed her cheek. "I'll make it all right for you," he said.

No you won't, she thought, *but you'll make it better.*

The next morning, Nelda threw her out. She looked at Gredel from be-

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neath the slab of grey healing plaster she'd pasted over the cut in her forehead, and she said, "I just can't have you here anymore. I just can't."

For a moment of blank terror, Gredel wondered if Antony's body had come bobbing up under Old Iola Bridge, but soon Gredel realized that wasn't the problem. The previous evening had put Nelda in a position of having to decide who she loved more, Antony or Gredel. She'd picked Antony, unaware that he was no longer an option.

Gredel went to her mother's, and Ava's objections died the moment she saw the bruise on Gredel's cheek. Gredel told her the story of what had happened—not being stupid, she left out what she'd asked Lamey to do—and Ava hugged her and told her she was proud of her. She worked with cosmetics for a long time to hide the damage.

And then she took Gredel to Maranic Town, to Bonifacio's, for ice cream.

Ava and Lamey and Panda helped carry Gredel's belongings to Ava's place, arms and boxes full of the clothing Lamey and Caro had bought her, the blouses and pants and frocks and coats and capes and hats and shoes and jewelry, all the stuff that had long ago overflowed the closets in her room at Nelda's, that was for the most part lying in neat piles on the old, worn carpet.

Panda was highly impressed by the tidiness of it. "You've got a *system* here," he said.

Ava was in a better situation than usual. Her man was married and visited only at regularly scheduled intervals, and he didn't mind if she spent her free time with family or friends. But Ava didn't have many friends—her previous men hadn't really let her have any—and so she was delighted to spend time with her daughter.

Lamey was disappointed that Gredel didn't want to move into one of his apartments. "I need my Ma right now," Gredel told him, and that seemed to satisfy him.

I don't want to live with someone who's going to be killed soon. That was what she thought to herself. But she wondered if she was obliged to live with the boy who had killed for her.

Caro was disappointed as well. "You could have moved in with *me!*" she said.

Shimmering delight sang in Gredel's mind. "You wouldn't mind?"

"No!" Caro was enthusiastic. "We could be sisters! We could shop and go out—have fun."

For days, Gredel basked in the warm attentions of Caro and her mother. She spent almost all her time with one or the other, enough so that Lamey began to get jealous, or at least to *pretend* that he was jealous—Lamey was sometimes hard to read that way. "Caro's kidnapped you," he half-joked over the phone. "I'm going to have to send the boys to fetch you back."

Gredel began to spend nights with Caro, the nights when Ava was with her man. There was a lot of room in the big bed. She found that Caro didn't so much go to sleep as put herself into a coma: she loaded endorphins into the med injector and gave herself one dose after another until unconsciousness claimed her. Gredel was horrified.

"Why do you do it?" she asked one night, as Caro reached for the injector.

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Caro gave her a glare. "Because I *like* it," she snarled. "I can't sleep without it."

Gredel shrank away from Caro's look. She didn't want Caro to rip into her the way she ripped into other people.

One night, Lamey took them both to a party. "I've got to take Caro out, too," he told Gredel "Otherwise I'd never see *you*."

The reason for the party was that Lamey had put up a loan for a restaurant and club, and the people hadn't made a go of it, so he'd foreclosed and taken the place over. He'd inherited a stockroom of liquor and a walk-in refrigerator full of food, decided it might as well not go to waste, and invited nearly everyone he knew. He paid the staff on for one more night and let all his guests know the food and drinks were free.

"We'll have fun tonight," he said, "and tomorrow I'll start looking for somebody to manage the place."

It was the last great party Gredel had with Lamey and his crew. The big room was filled with food and music and people having a good time. Laughter rang from the club's rusted, reinforced iron ceiling, which was not an attempt at decor but a reminder of the fact that the floor above had once been braced to support heavy machinery. Though Gredel didn't have anything to drink she still got high simply from being around so many people who were soaking up the good times along with the free liquor. Gredel's mind whirled as she danced, whirled like her body spinning along the dance floor in response to Lamey's smooth, perfect, elegant motion. He leaned close and spoke into her ear.

"Come and live with me, Earthgirl."

She shook her head, smiled. "Not yet."

"I want to marry you. Have babies with you."

A shiver of pleasure sang up Gredel's spine. She had no reply, only put her arms around Lamey's neck and rested her head on his shoulder.

Gredel didn't know quite how she deserved to be so loved. Lamey, Caro, her mother, each of them filling a dreadful hollowness inside her, a hollowness she hadn't realized was there until it was filled with warmth and tenderness.

Lamey danced with Caro as well, or rather guided her around the dance floor while she did the jumping-up-and-down thing she did instead of dancing. Caro was having a good time. She drank only a couple of bottles of wine over the course of the night, which for her was modest, and the rest of the time danced with Lamey or members of his crew. As they left the club, she kissed Lamey extravagantly to thank him for inviting her. Lamey put an arm around both Caro and Gredel.

"I just like to show my beautiful sisters a good time," he said.

He and Gredel took Caro to the Volta Apartments, after which they intended to drive back to the Fabs to spend the dawn in one of Lamey's apartments. But Caro lingered in the car, leaning forward out of the back seat to prop her head and shoulders between Lamey and Gredel. They all talked and laughed, and the doorman hovered in the Volta vestibule, waiting for the moment to let Lady Sula past the doors. Finally, Lamey said it was time to go.

"Save yourself that drive back to the Fabs," Caro said. "You two can use my bed. I can sleep on the sofa."

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Lamey gave her a look. "I hate to put a beautiful woman out of her bed."

Caro gave a sharp, sudden laugh, then turned to kiss Gredel on the cheek. "That depends on Gredel."

Ah. Ha, Gredel thought, surprised and not surprised.

Lamey, it seems, was looking for a return on his investment. Gredel thought a moment, then shrugged.

"I don't mind," she said.

So Lamey took Gredel and Caro up to the apartment and made love to them both. Gredel watched her boyfriend's pale butt jigging up and down over Caro and wondered why this scene didn't bother her.

Because I don't love him, she decided. *If I loved him, this would matter.*

And then she thought, *Maybe Caro loves him.* Maybe Caro would want to stay with Lamey in the Fabs, and Gredel could take Caro's place in the academy and go to Earth.

Maybe that would be the solution that would leave everyone happy.

Caro apologized the next day, after Lamey left. "I was awful last night," she said. "I don't know what you must think of me."

"It was all right," Gredel said. She was folding Caro's clothes and putting them away. *Cleaning up after the orgy,* she thought.

"I'm such a slut sometimes," Caro said. "You must think I'm trying to steal Lamey away from you."

"I'm not thinking that."

Caro trotted up behind Gredel and put her arms around her. She leaned her head against Gredel's shoulder, and put on the lisping voice of a penitent little girl. "Do you forgive me?"

"Yes," Gredel said. "Of course."

Suddenly, Caro was all energy. She skipped around the room, bounding around Gredel as Gredel folded her clothes. "I'll make it up to you!" Caro proclaimed. "I'll take you anywhere you want today! What would you like? Shopping?"

Gredel considered the offer. It wasn't as if she needed new things—she was beginning to feel a little oppressed by all her possessions—but, on the other hand, she enjoyed Caro's pleasure in purchasing them. But then another idea struck her.

"Godfrey's," she said.

Caro's eyes glittered. "Oh yes."

It was a glorious day—summer was coming on, and warm breezes flowed through the louvered windows on the private rooms at Godfrey's, breezes that wafted floral perfume over Gredel's skin. She and Caro started with a steam bath, then a facial, a lotion wrap, a massage that stretched all the way from the scalp to the toes. Afterward they lay on couches, talking and giggling, caressed by the breezes and drinking fruit juice as smiling young women gave them manicures and pedicures.

Every square inch of Gredel's skin seemed flushed with summer, with life. Back at the Volta, Caro dressed Gredel in one of her own outfits, the expensive fabrics gliding over nerve-tingling, butter-smooth flesh. When Lamey came to pick them up, Caro put Gredel's hand in Lamey's, and guided them both toward the door.

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"Have a lovely night," she said.

"Aren't you coming with us?" Lamey asked.

Caro only shook her head and laughed. Her green eyes looked into Gredel's—Gredel saw amusement there, and secrets that Lamey would never share.

Caro steered them into the hall and closed the door behind them. Lamey paused a moment, looking back.

"Is Caro all right?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Gredel said. "Now let's go find a place to dance."

She felt as if she were floating, moving across the floor so lightly that she almost danced on her way to the elevator. It occurred to her that she was happy, that happiness had never been hers before but now she had it.

All it took was getting Antony out of the picture.

The first crack in Gredel's happiness occurred two afternoons later, when Gredel arrived at the Volta late due to a blockage on the train tracks from the Fabs. Gredel let herself in, and found Caro snoring on her bed. Caro was dressed to go out, but she must have gotten bored waiting for Gredel to turn up, because there was an empty wine bottle on the floor and the med injector near her right hand.

Gredel called Caro, then shook her. There was no response at all. Caro was pale, her flesh cool and faintly bluish.

Another long, grating snore shredded the air. Gredel felt her heart turn over at the pure insistence of the sound. She seized the med injector and checked the contents: endorphin analogue, something called Phenyldorphin-Zed.

Caro began another snore, and then the sound simply rattled to a halt. Her breathing had simply stopped. Terror roared through Gredel's veins.

She had never dealt with an overdose, but there was a certain amount of oral legend on the subject that circulated through the Fabs. One of the fixes involved filling the victim's pants with ice, she remembered. Ice on the genitals was supposed to wake you right up. Or was that just for men?

Gredel straddled Caro and slapped her hard across the face. Her own nerves leaped at the sound, but Caro gave a start, her eyelids coming partway open, and she gasped in air.

Gredel slapped her again. Caro gasped again and coughed, and her lids opened all the way. Her eyes were eerie, blank convexities of green jasper, the pupils so shrunk they could barely be seen.

"What—" Caro said. "What are you—?"

"You've got to get up." Gredel slid off the bed and pulled Caro by the arm. "You've got to get up and walk around with me, right?"

Caro gave a lazy laugh. "What is—what—"

"Stand up now!"

Gredel managed to haul Caro upright. Caro found her feet with difficulty, and Gredel got Caro's arm around her shoulders and began to drag Caro over the floor. Caro laughed again. "Music!" she snorted. "We need music if we're going to dance!"

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This struck her as so amusing that she almost doubled over with laughter, but Gredel pulled her upright and began moving her again. She got Caro into the front room and began marching in circles around the sofa.

"You're funny, Earthgirl," Caro said. "Funny, funny." Laughter kept bubbling out of her throat. Gredel's shoulders ached with Caro's weight.

"Help me, Caro," she ordered.

"Funny funny. Funny Earthgirl."

When she couldn't hold Caro up any more, Gredel dumped her on the sofa and went to the kitchen to get the coffee maker started. Then she returned to the front room and found Caro asleep again. She slapped Caro twice, and Caro opened her eyes.

"Yes, Sergei," she said. "You do that. You do that all you want."

"You've got to get up, Caro."

"Why wouldn't you talk to me?" Caro asked. There were tears in her eyes. Gredel pulled her to her feet and began walking with her again.

"I called you," Caro said as they walked. "I couldn't stand it anymore and I called you and you wouldn't talk to me. Your secretary said you were out but I knew he was lying from the way he said it."

It was three or four hours before Gredel's fear began to ebb. Caro was able to walk on her own, and her conversation was almost normal, if a little subdued. Gredel left her sitting on the sofa with a cup of coffee and went into the bedroom. She took the med injector, and two others she found in the bedroom and another in the bathroom, plus the cartridges of Phenyldorphin-Zed and every other drug cartridge she could find, and she hid them under some towels in the bathroom so that she could carry them out later, when Caro wasn't looking. She wanted to get rid of the liquor, too, but that would be too obvious. Maybe she could pour most of it down the sink when she had the chance.

"You stopped *breathing*," Gredel told Caro later. "You've got to stop using, Caro."

Caro nodded over her cup of coffee. Her pupils had expanded a bit, and her eyes were almost normal-looking. "I've been letting it get out of hand."

"I was never so frightened in my life. You've just got to stop."

"I'll be good," Caro said.

Gredel was sleeping over three nights later, when Caro produced a med injector before bed and held it to her neck. Gredel reached out in sudden terror and yanked the injector away.

"Caro! You said you'd stop!"

Caro smiled, gave an apologetic laugh. "It's all right," she said. "I was depressed the other day, over something that happened. I let it get out of hand. But I'm not depressed any more." She tugged the injector against Gredel's fingers. "Let go," she said. "I'll be all right."

"Don't," Gredel begged.

Caro laughingly detached Gredel's fingers from the injector, then held it to her neck and pressed the trigger. She laughed while Gredel felt a fist tightening on her insides.

"See?" Caro said. "Nothing wrong here."

Gredel talked to Lamey about it the next day. "Just tell Panda to stop selling to her," she said.

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"What good would that do?" Lamey said. "She had sources before she ever met any of us. And if she wanted, she could just go into a pharmacy and pay full price."

Anxiety sang along Gredel's nerves. She would just have to be very careful, and watch Caro to make sure there weren't any more accidents.

Gredel's happiness ended shortly after, on the first hot afternoon of summer. Gredel and Caro returned from the arcades tired and sweating, and Caro flung her purchases down on the sofa and announced she was going to take a long, cool bath. On her way to the bathroom, Caro took a bottle of chilled wine from the kitchen, opened it, offered some to Gredel, who declined, then carried the bottle and a glass into the bathroom with her.

The sound of running water came distantly to the front room. Gredel helped herself to a papaya fizz, and, for lack of anything else to do turned on the video wall.

There was a drama about the Fleet, except that all the actors striving to put down the mutiny were Naxids. All their acting was in the way their beaded scales shifted color, and Gredel didn't understand any of it. The Fleet setting reminded her of Caro's academy appointment, though, and Gredel shifted to the data channel and looked up the requirements for the Cheng Ho academy, which the Sulas traditionally attended.

By the time Caro came padding out in her dressing gown, Gredel was full of information. "You'd better find a tailor, Caro," she said. "Look at the uniforms you've got to get made." The video wall paged through one picture after another. "Dress, undress," Gredel itemized. "Ship coveralls, planetary fatigues, formal dinner dress, parade dress—just look at that hat! And Cheng Ho's in a temperate zone, so you've got greatcoats and jackboots for winter, plus uniforms for any sport you decide to do, and a ton of other gear. Dinner settings!—in case you give a formal dinner, your clan crest optional."

Caro blinked and looked at the screen as if she were having trouble focusing on it all. "What are you talking about?" she said.

"When you go to the Cheng Ho academy. Do you know who Cheng Ho *was,* by the way? I looked it up. He—"

"Stop babbling." Gredel looked at Caro in surprise. Caro's lips were set in a disdainful twist. "I'm not going to any stupid academy," she said. "So just forget about all that, all right?"

Gredel stared at her. "But you have to," she said. "It's your career, the only one you're allowed to have."

Caro gave a little hiss of contempt. "What do I need a career for? I'm doing fine as I am."

It was a hot day and Gredel was tired and had not had a rest or a bath or a drink, and she blundered right through the warning signals Caro was flying, the signs that she'd not only had her bottle of wine in the bath, but taken something else as well, something that kinked and spiked her nerves and brought her temper sizzling.

"We *planned* it," Gredel insisted. "You're going into the Fleet, and I'll be your orderly. And we can both get off the planet and—"

"*I don't want to hear this useless crap!*" Caro screamed. Her shriek was

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so loud that it stunned Gredel into silence and set her heart beating louder than Caro's angry words. Caro advanced on Gredel, green fury flashing from her eyes. "You think I'd go into the Fleet? The Fleet, just for *you? Who do you think you are?*"

Caro stood over Gredel. Her arms windmilled as if they were throwing rocks at Gredel's face. "You drag your ass all over this apartment!" she raged. "You—you wear my clothes! You're in my bank accounts all the time—*where's my money, hey! My money!*"

"I never took your money!" Gredel gasped. "Not a cent! I never—"

"*Liar!*" Caro's hand lashed out, and the slap sounded louder than a gunshot. Gredel stared at her, too overwhelmed by surprise to raise a hand to her stinging cheek. Caro screamed on.

"I see you everywhere—everywhere in my life! You tell me what to do, how much to spend—I don't even have any friends anymore! They're all *your* friends!" She reached for the shopping bags that held their purchases and hurled them at Gredel. Gredel warded them off, but when they bounced to the floor, Caro just picked them up and threw them again, so finally Gredel just snatched them out of the air and let them pile in her lap, a crumpled heap of expensive tailored fabrics and hand-worked leather.

"Take your crap and get out of here!" Caro cried. She grabbed one of Gredel's arms and hauled her off the sofa. Gredel clutched the packages to her with her other arm, but several spilled as Caro shoved her to the door. "I never want to see you again! Get out! Get out! *Get out!*"

The door slammed behind her. Gredel stood in the corridor with a package clutched to her breast as if it were a child. Inside the apartment, she could hear Caro throwing things.

She didn't know what to do. Her impulse was to open the door—she knew the codes—to go into the apartment and try to calm Caro and explain herself.

I didn't take the money, she protested. *I didn't ask for anything.*

Something hit the door hard enough so that it jumped in its frame.

Not the Fleet. The thought seemed to steal the strength from her limbs. Her head spun. *I have to stay here now. On Spannan, in the Fabs. I have to. . . .*

What about tomorrow? a part of her cringed. She and Caro had made plans to go to a new boutique in the morning. Were they going or not?

The absurdity of the question struck home and sudden rage possessed her, rage at her own imbecility. She should have known better than to press Caro on the question, not when she was in this mood.

She went to her mother's apartment and put the packages away. Ava wasn't home. Anger and despair battled in her mind. She called Lamey and let him send someone to pick her up, then let him divert her for the rest of the evening.

In the morning, she went to the Volta at the time she had planned with Caro. There was a traffic jam in the lobby—a family was moving into the building, and their belongings were piled onto several motorized carts, each with the Volta's gilt blazon, that jammed the lobby waiting for elevators. Gredel greeted the doorman in her Peer voice, and he called her "Lady Sula" and put her alone into the next elevator.

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She hesitated at the door to Caro's apartment. She knew she was groveling, and knew as well that she didn't deserve to grovel.

But this was her only hope. What choice did she have?

She knocked, and when there wasn't an answer she knocked again. She heard a shuffling step inside and then Caro opened the door and blinked at her groggily through disordered strands of hair. She was dressed as Gredel had last seen her, bare feet, naked under her dressing gown.

"Why didn't you just come in?" Caro said. She left the door open and withdrew into the apartment. Gredel followed, her heart pulsing sickly in her chest.

There were several bottles lying on tables, and Gredel recognized the juniper reek that oozed from Caro's pores. "I feel awful," Caro said. "I had too much last night."

Doesn't she remember? Gredel wondered. Or is she just pretending?

Caro reached for the gin bottle and the neck of the bottle clattered against a tumbler as she poured herself two fingers' worth. "Let me get myself together," Caro said, and drank.

A thought struck Gredel with the force of revelation.

She's just a drunk, she thought. *Just another damn drunk.*

Caro put the tumbler down, wiped her mouth, gave a hoarse laugh. "Now we can have some fun," she said.

"Yes," Gredel said. "Let's go."

She had begun to think it might never be fun again.

Perhaps it was then that Gredel began to hate Caro, or perhaps the incident only released hatred and resentment that had simmered, denied, for some time. But now Gredel could scarcely spend an hour with Caro without finding new fuel for anger. Caro's carelessness made Gredel clench her teeth, and her laughter grated on Gredel's nerves. The empty days that Caro shared with Gredel, the pointless drifting from boutique to restaurant to club, now made Gredel want to shriek. Gredel deeply resented tidying up after Caro even as she did it. Caro's surging moods, the sudden shifts from laughter to fury to sullen withdrawal, brought Gredel's own temper near the breaking point. Even Caro's affection and her impulsive generosity began to seem trying. *Why is she making all this fuss over me?* Gredel thought. *What's she after?*

But Gredel managed to keep her thoughts to herself, and, at times, she caught herself enjoying Caro's company, caught herself in a moment of pure enjoyment or unfeigned laughter. And then she wondered how this could be genuine as well as the other, the delight and the hatred coexisting in her skull.

It was like her so-called beauty, she thought. Her alleged beauty was what most people reacted to; but it wasn't her *self.* She managed to have an inner existence, thoughts and hopes entirely her own, apart from the shell that was her appearance. But it was the shell that people saw, it was the shell that most people spoke to, hated, envied, or desired. The Gredel that interacted with Caro was another kind of shell, a kind of machine she'd built for the purpose, built without intending to. It wasn't any less genuine for being a machine, but it wasn't her *self.*

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Her *self* hated Caro. She knew that now.

If Caro detected any of Gredel's inner turmoil, she gave no sign. In any case, she was rarely in a condition to be very observant. Her alcohol consumption had increased as she shifted from wine to hard liquor. When she wanted to get drunk, she wanted the drunk *instantly,* the way she wanted everything, and hard liquor got her there quicker. The ups and downs increased as well, and the spikes and valleys that were her behavior. She was banned from one of her expensive restaurants for talking loudly, and singing, and hurling a plate at the waiter who asked her to be more quiet. She was thrown out of a club for attacking a woman in the ladies' room. Gredel never found out what the fight was about, but for days afterward Caro proudly sported the black eye she'd got from the bouncer's fist.

For the most part, Gredel managed to avoid Caro's anger. She learned the warning signs, and she'd also learned how to manipulate Caro's moods. She could change Caro's music, or at least shift the focus of Caro's growing anger from herself to someone else.

Despite her feelings, she was now in Caro's company more than ever. Lamey was in hiding. She had first found out about it when he sent Panda to pick her up at Caro's apartment instead of coming himself. Panda drove her to the Fabs, but not to a human neighborhood: instead he took her into a building inhabited by Lyones. A family of the giant flightless birds stared at her as she waited in the lobby for the elevator. There was an acrid, ammonia smell in the air.

Lamey was in a small apartment on the top floor, with a pair of his guards and a Lyone. The avian shifted from one foot to the other as Gredel entered. Lamey seemed nervous. He didn't say anything to Gredel, just gave a quick jerk of his chin to indicate that they should go into the back room.

The room was thick with the heat of summer. The ammonia smell was very strong. Lamey steered Gredel to the bed. She sat, but Lamey was unable to be still: he paced back and forth in the narrow range permitted by the small room. His smooth, elegant walk had developed hitches and stutters, uncertainties that marred his normal grace.

"I'm sorry about this," he said. "But something's happened."

"Is the Patrol looking for you?"

"I don't know." His mouth gave a little twitch. "Bourdelle was arrested yesterday. It was the Legion of Diligence who arrested him, not the Patrol, so that means they've got him for something serious, something he could be executed for. We've got word that he's bargaining with the prefect's office." His mouth twitched again. Linkboys did not bargain with the prefect, they were expected to go to their punishment with their mouths shut.

"We don't know what he's going to offer them," Lamey went on. "But he's just a link up from me, and he could be selling me or any of the boys." He paused in his pacing, rubbed his chin. Sweat shone on his forehead. "I'm going to make sure it's not me," he said.

"I understand," Gredel said.

Lamey looked at her. His blue eyes were feverish. "From now on, you

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can't call me. I can't call you. We can't be seen in public together. If I want you, I'll send someone for you at Caro's."

Gredel looked up at him. "But—" she began, then, "When?"

"When I want you," he said insistently. "I don't know when. You'll just have to be there when I need you."

"Yes," Gredel said. Her mind whirled. "I'll be there."

He sat next to her on the bed and took her by the shoulders. "I missed you, Earthgirl," he said. "I really need you now."

She kissed him. His skin felt feverish. She could taste the fear on him. Lamey's unsteady fingers began to fumble with the buttons of her blouse. *You're going to die soon,* she thought.

Unless, of course, it was Gredel who paid the penalty instead, the way Ava had paid for the sins of her man.

Gredel had to start looking out for herself, before it was too late.

When Gredel left Lamey, he gave her two hundred zeniths in cash. "I can't buy you things right now, Earthgirl," he explained. "But buy yourself something nice for me, all right?

Gredel remembered Antony's claim that she whored for money. It was no longer an accusation she could deny.

One of Lamey's boys drove Gredel from the rendezvous to her mother's building. Gredel took the stairs instead of the elevator because it gave her time to think. By the time she got to her mother's door, she had the beginnings of an idea.

But first she had to tell her mother about Lamey, and why she had to move in with Caro. "Of course, honey," Ava said. She took Gredel's hands and pressed them. "Of course you've got to go."

Loyalty to her man was what Ava knew, Gredel thought. She had been arrested and sentenced to years in the country for a man she'd hardly ever seen again. She'd spent her life sitting alone amid expensive decor, waiting for one man or another to show up. She was beautiful, but in the bright summer light Gredel could see the first cracks in her mother's façade, the faint lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth that the years would only broaden. When the beauty faded, the men would fade, too.

Ava had cast her lot with beauty and with men, neither of which would last. If Gredel remained with Lamey, or with some other linkboy, she would be following Ava's path.

The next morning, Gredel took a pair of bags to Caro's place and let herself in. Caro was asleep, so far gone in torpor that she didn't wake when Gredel padded into the bedroom and took her wallet with its identification. Gredel slipped out again and went to a bank, where she opened an account in the name of Caroline, Lady Sula, and deposited three-quarters of what Lamey had given her.

When asked for a thumbprint, she gave her own.

When Gredel returned from the bank, she found Caro groping with a shivering hand for her first cup of coffee. After Caro took the coffee to the bathroom for the long bath that would soak away the stale alcohol from her pores, Gredel replaced Caro's wallet, then opened the computer link

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and transferred some of Caro's money, ten zeniths only, to her new account, just to make certain that it worked.

It worked fine.

I have just done a criminal act, she thought. *A criminal act that can be traced to me.*

Whatever she may have done before, it hadn't been *this*.

After Caro's bath, she and Gredel went to a café for breakfast, and Gredel told her about Lamey being on the run and she asked if she could move in with Caro so that he would be able to send for her. Caro was thrilled. She had never heard of anything so romantic in her life.

Romantic? Gredel thought. It was sordid beyond belief.

But Caro hadn't been in the sultry little room in the Lyone quarter, the smell of ammonia in her nostrils while Lamey's sweat rained down on her. Let her keep her illusions.

"Thank you," she said. But she knew that once she was with Caro, it wouldn't be long before Caro would grow bored with her, or impatient, or angry. Whatever Gredel was going to do, it would have to be soon.

"I don't know how often Lamey's going to send for me," she said. "But I hope it's not on your birthday. I'd like you and I to celebrate that together."

The scowl on Caro's face was immediate, and predictable. "Birthday? My birthday was last winter." The scowl deepened. "That was the last time Sergei and I were together."

"Birthday?" Gredel said, in her Earth accent. "I meant *Earth*day, darling." And when Caro's scowl began to look dangerous, she added quickly, "Your birthday in Earth years. I do the math, see, it's a kind of game. And your Earthday is next week—you'll be fifteen." Gredel smiled. "The same age as me, I turned fifteen Earth years just before I met you."

It wasn't true, not exactly—Caro's Earthday was in three months—but Gredel knew that Caro would never do the math. Might not even know *how* to do it.

There was so much Caro didn't know. The knowledge brought a kind of savage pleasure to Gredel's mind. Caro didn't know *anything,* didn't even know that her best friend hated her. She didn't know that Gredel had stolen her money and her identity only an hour ago, and could do it again whenever she wanted.

The days went by and were even pleasurable in a strange, disconnected way. Gredel thought she finally understood what it was like to be Caro, to have nothing that attached her to anything, to have long hours to fill and nothing to fill them with but whatever impulse drifted into her mind. Gredel felt that way herself—mentally, at least, she was cutting her own ties free, all of them, floating free of everything she'd known.

To save herself trouble, Gredel exerted herself to please Caro, and Caro responded. Caro's mood was sunny, and she laughed and joked and dressed Gredel like a doll, as she always had. Behind her pleasing mask, Gredel despised Caro for being so easily manipulated. *You're so stupid,* she thought.

But pleasing Gredel brought trouble of its own, because when Lamey's boy called for her, Gredel was standing in the rain, in a Torminel neighbor-

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hood, trying to buy Caro a cartridge of endorphin analog—with Lamey's businesses in eclipse, she could no longer get the stuff from Panda.

When Gredel finally connected with her ride and got to the place where Lamey was hiding—he was back in the Terran Fabs, at least—he had been waiting for hours, and his patience was gone. He got her alone in the bedroom and slapped her around for a while, telling her it was her fault, that she had to know that she had to be where he could find her when he needed her.

Gredel lay on her back on the bed, letting him do what he wanted, and she thought, *This is going to be my whole life if I don't get out of here.* She looked at the pistol Lamey had waiting on the bedside table for whoever he thought might kick down the door, and she thought about grabbing the pistol and blowing Lamey's brains out. Or her own brains. Or just walking into the street with the pistol and blowing out brains at random.

No, she thought. Stick to the plan.

Lamey gave her five hundred zeniths afterward. Maybe that was an apology.

Sitting in the car later, with her bruised cheek swelling and the money crumpled in her hand and Lamey's slime still drooling down her thigh, she thought about calling the Legion of Diligence and letting them know where Lamey was hiding. But, instead, she told the boy to take her to a pharmacy near Caro's place.

She walked inside and found a box of plasters that would soak up the bruises, and she took it to the drug counter in the back. The older woman behind the counter looked at her face with knowing sympathy. "Anything else, honey?"

"Yes," Gredel said. "Two vials of Phenyldorphin-Zed."

She was required to sign the Narcotics Book for the endorphin analog, and the name she scrawled was *Sula.*

Caro was outraged by Gredel's bruises. "Lamey comes round here again, I'll kick him in the balls!" she said. "I'll hit him with a chair!"

"Forget about it," Gredel said wearily. She didn't want demonstrations of loyalty from Caro right now. Her feelings were confused enough: she didn't want to start having to like Caro all over again.

Caro pulled Gredel into the bedroom and cleaned her face, and then she cut the plasters to fit Gredel's face and applied them. She did a good enough job at sopping up the bruises and swelling so that the next day, when the plasters were removed, the bruises had mostly disappeared, leaving behind some faint discoloration, easily covered with cosmetics. Her whole face hurt, though, and so did her ribs and her solar plexus where Lamey had hit her.

Caro brought Gredel breakfast from the café and hovered around her until Gredel wanted to shriek.

If you want to help, she thought at Caro, *take your appointment to the academy and get us both out of here.*

But Caro didn't answer the mental command. And her solicitude faded by afternoon, when she opened the day's first bottle. It was vodka flavored with bison grass, which explained the strange fusil-oil overtones

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Gredel had scented on Caro's skin the last few days. By mid-afternoon, Caro had consumed most of the bottle and fallen asleep on the couch.

Gredel felt a small, chill triumph at this. It was good to be reminded why she hated her friend.

Next day was Caro's phony Earthday. *Last chance,* Gredel thought at her. *Last chance to mention the academy.* But the word never passed Caro's lips.

"I want to pay you back for everything you've done," Gredel said. "Your Earthday is on me." She put her arm around Caro.

"I've got everything planned," she said.

They started at Godfrey's for the full treatment, massage, facial, hair, the lot. Then lunch at a brass-railed bistro south of the arcades, bubbling grilled cheese on rare vashe roast and crusty bread, with a salad of marinated dedger flowers. To Caro's surprise, Gredel called for a bottle of wine, and poured some of it into her own glass.

"You're *drinking,*" Caro said, delighted. "What's got into you?"

"I want to toast your Earthday," Gredel said.

Being drunk might make it easier, she thought.

Gredel kept refilling Caro's glass while sipping at her own, and so the first bottle went. Gredel took Caro to the arcades then, and bought her a summer dress of silk patterned with rhompé birds and jennifer flowers, a jacket shimmering with gold and green sequins, matching Caro's hair and eyes, and two pairs of shoes. She bought outfits for herself as well.

After taking their treasures to Caro's place, where Caro had a few shots of the bison vodka, they went to dinner at one of Caro's exclusive dining clubs. Caro hadn't been thrown out of this club yet, but the maitre d' was on guard enough to sit them well away from everyone else. Caro ordered cocktails and two bottles of wine *and* after-dinner drinks. Gredel's head spun even after the careful sips she'd been taking; she couldn't imagine what Caro must be feeling. Caro needed a jolt of benzedrine to get to the dance club Gredel had put next on the agenda, though she had no trouble keeping her feet once she got there.

After dancing awhile Gredel said she was tired, and they brushed off the male admirers they'd collected and took a taxi home.

Gredel showered while Caro headed for the bison vodka again. The benzedrine had given her a lot of energy that she put into finishing the bottle. Gredel changed into the silk lounging suit Caro had bought her on their first day together, and she put the two vials of endorphin analog into a pocket.

Caro was on the couch where Gredel had left her. Her eyes were bright, but when she spoke to Gredel her words were slurred.

"I have one more present," Gredel said. She reached into her pocket and held out the two vials. "I think this is a kind you like. I really wasn't sure."

Caro laughed. "You take care of me all day, and now you help me to sleep!" She reached across and put her arms around Gredel. "You're my best sister, Earthgirl." In Caro's embrace, Gredel could smell bison grass and sweat and perfume all mingled, and she tried to keep a firm grip on her hatred even as her heart turned over in her chest.

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Caro unloaded her med injector and put in one of the vials of Phenyldorphin-Zed and used it right away. Her eyelids fluttered as the endorphin flooded her brain. "Oh nice," she murmured. "Such a good sister." She gave herself another dose a few minutes later. She spoke a few soft words but her voice kept floating away. She gave herself a third dose and fell asleep, her golden hair fallen across her face as she lay on the pillow.

Gredel took the injector from Caro's limp fingers. She reached out and brushed the hair from Caro's face.

"Want some more?" she asked. "Want some more, sister Caro?"

Caro gave a little indistinct murmur. Her lips curled up in a smile. When Gredel fired another dose into her carotid the smile broadened, and she shrugged herself into the sofa pillows like a happy puppy.

Gredel turned from her and reached for Caro's portable computer console. She called up Caro's banking files, and prepared a form closing Caro's bank account and transferring its contents to the account Gredel had set up. Then she prepared another message to Caro's trust account on Spannan's ring, instructing any further payments to be sent to the new account as well.

"Caro," Gredel said. "Caro, I need your thumbprint here, all right?"

She stroked Caro awake, and managed to get her to lean over the console long enough to press her thumb, twice, to the reader. Then Gredel handed the injector to Caro and watched her give herself another dose.

Now I'm really *a criminal,* she thought. She had left a trail of data that pointed straight to herself.

But even so, she could not bring herself to completely commit to this course of action. She left herself a way out. *Caro has to want it,* she thought. *I won't give her any more if she says no.*

Caro sighed, settled herself more deeply into the pillows. "Would you like some more?" Gredel asked.

"Mmm," Caro said, and smiled.

Gredel took the injector from her hand and gave her another dose.

After a while, she exhausted the first vial and started on the second. With each dose, she shook Caro a little and asked if she wanted more. Caro would sigh, or laugh, or murmur, but never said no. Gredel triggered dose after dose.

After the second vial was exhausted, the snoring started, Caro's breath heaving itself past the palate, the lungs pumping hard, sometimes with a kind of wrench. Gredel remembered the sound from when Caro had given herself too much endorphin, and the memory caused her to leap from the sofa and walk very fast around the apartment, rubbing her arms to fight her sudden chill.

The snoring went on. Gredel very much needed something to do, so she went into the kitchen and made coffee. And then the snoring stopped.

Ice shuddered along Gredel's nerves. She went to the kitchen door and stared out into the front room, at the tumbled golden hair that hung off the end of the couch. *It's over,* she thought.

And then Caro's head rolled, and Gredel's heart froze as she saw Caro's hand come up and comb the hair with her fingers. There was a gurgling snort, and the snoring resumed.

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Gredel stood in the door as cold terror pulsed through her veins. But she told herself, *No, it can't be long now.*

And then, suddenly, she couldn't stand still any longer, and she walked swiftly around the apartment, straightening and tidying. The new clothes went into the closet, the shoes on their racks, the empty bottle in the trash. Wherever she went, the snores pursued her. Sometimes they stopped for a few paralyzing seconds, but then resumed.

Abruptly, Gredel couldn't bear being in the apartment, and she put on a pair of shoes and went to the freight elevator and took it to the basement, where she went in search of one of the motorized carts they used to move luggage and furniture. There were a great many objects in the basement, things that had been discarded or forgotten about, and Gredel found some strong dedger-fiber rope and an old compressor, a piece of solid bronzework heavy enough to anchor a fair-sized boat.

Gredel put these in the cart and pushed it to the elevator. As she approached Sula's doors, she could hear Caro's snores through the enameled steel. Gredel's fingers trembled as she pressed codes into the lock.

Caro was still on the couch, her breath still fighting its way past her throat. Gredel cast an urgent glance at the clock. There weren't many hours of darkness left, and darkness was required for what happened next.

Gredel sat at Caro's feet and hugged a pillow to her chest and watched her breathe. Caro's skin was pale and looked clammy. "Please," Gredel begged under her breath. "Please die now. Please." But Caro wouldn't die. Her breaths grated on and on, until Gredel began to hate them with a bitter resentment. This was so *typical*, she thought. Caro couldn't even *die* without getting it all wrong.

Gredel looked at the wall clock, and it stared back at her like the barrel of a gun. Come dawn, she thought, the gun goes off. Or she could sit in the apartment all day with a corpse, and that was a thought she couldn't face.

Again Caro's breath hung suspended, and Gredel felt her own breath cease for the long moment of suspense. Then Caro dragged in another long rattling gasp, and Gredel felt her heart sink. She knew that her tools had betrayed her. She would have to finish this herself.

All anger was gone by now, all hatred, all emotion except a sick weariness, a desire to get it over. The pillow was already held to her chest, a warm comfort in the room filled only with Caro's racking, tormented snores.

She cast one last look at Caro, thought *Please die* at her one more time, but Caro didn't respond any more than she had ever responded to any of Gredel's other wishes.

Gredel suddenly lunged across the sofa, her body moving without any conscious command, the movement seeming to come from pure instinct. She pressed the pillow over Caro's face and put her weight on it.

Please die, she thought.

Caro hardly fought at all. Her body twisted on the couch, and both her hands came up, but the hands didn't fight, they just fell across Gredel's back in a kind of halfhearted embrace.

Gredel would have felt better if Caro had fought. It would have given her hatred something to fasten onto.

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Instead, she felt, through the closeness of their bodies, the urgent kick-kick-kick of Caro's diaphragm as it tried to draw in air, the kick repeated over and over again. Fast, then slow, then fast. Caro's feet shivered. Gredel could feel Caro's hands trembling as they lay on her back. Tears spilled from Gredel's eyes.

The kicking stopped. The trembling stopped.

Gredel leaned on the pillow a while longer just to make sure. The pillow was wet with tears. When she finally took the pillow away, the pale, cold thing beneath seemed to bear no resemblance to Caro at all.

Caro was weight now, not a person. That made what followed a lot easier.

Handling a limp body was much more difficult than Gredel had ever imagined. By the time she got it onto the cart, she was panting for breath and her eyes stung with sweat. She covered Caro with a bed sheet, and she added some empty suitcases to the cart as well. She took the cart to the freight elevator, then left by the loading dock at the back of the building.

"I am Caroline, Lady Sula," she rehearsed her story. "I'm moving to a new place because my lover beat me." She would have the identification to prove her claim, and what remained of the bruises, and the suitcases plain to see alongside the covered objects that weren't so plain.

Gredel didn't need to use her story. The streets were deserted as she walked downslope alongside the humming cart, down to the Iola River.

The roads ran high above the river on either side, with ramps that descended to the darkened riverside quay below. Gredel rode the cart down the ramp to the river's edge. This was the good part of Maranic Town and there were no houseboats here, no beggars, no homeless, and—at this hour—no fishermen. The only encounters Gredel feared were lovers sheltering under the bridges, but by now it was so late that even the lovers had gone home.

It was as hard getting Caro off the cart as it had been getting her on it, but once she went into the river, tied to the compressor, the dark waters closed over her with barely a ripple. In a video drama Caro would have floated a while, poignantly, saying goodbye to the world, but there was none of that here, just the silent dark submersion and ripples that died swiftly in the current.

Caro had never been one for protracted goodbyes.

Gredel walked alongside the cart back to the Volta. A few cars slowed to look at her, but moved on.

In the apartment, she tried to sleep, but Caro's scent filled the bed, and sleep was impossible there. Caro had died on the sofa and Gredel didn't want to go near it. She caught a few hours' fitful rest on a chair, and then the woman called Caroline Sula rose and began her day.

The first thing she did was send in the confirmation of her appointment to the Chang Ho Academy.

The first day she packed two suitcases and took them to Maranic Port and the ground-effect ferry that took her across the Krassow Sea to Vidalia. From there, she took the express train up the Hayakh Escarpment to the Quaylah Plateau, where high altitude moderated the subtropical

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heat of the Equatorial Continent. The planet's antimatter ring arced almost directly overhead.

Paysec was a winter resort, and the snowfall wouldn't begin here until the monsoon shifted to the northeast, so she found good rates for a small apartment in Lus'trel, and took it for two months. She bought some clothes, not the extravagant garments she would have found in Maranic Town's arcades, but practical country clothes, and boots for walking. She found a tailor and he began to assemble the extensive wardrobe she would need for the academy.

She didn't want Lady Sula's disappearance from Maranic Town to cause any official disturbance, so she sent a message to Caro's official guardian, Jacob Biswas, telling him that she found Maranic too distracting and had come to Lus'trel in order to concentrate on academic preparation for the Academy. She told him she was giving up the Maranic apartment, and that he could collect anything she'd left there.

Because she didn't trust her impersonation of Caro with someone who knew her well, she didn't use video, she typed the message and sent it print only.

Biswas called back almost immediately, but she didn't take his call or any of the other calls that followed. She replied with print messages to the effect that she was sorry she'd been out when he called, but she was spending a lot of time in the library cramming.

That wasn't far from the truth. Requirements for the service academies were posted on the computer net, and most of the courses were available in video files, and she knew she was deeply deficient in almost every subject. She worked hard.

She only answered one call, when she happened to be home, was able to listen to the answerware, and realized that the caller was Sergei. She answered and called him every filthy name she could think of, and, once her initial anger was a little spent, she began to choose words more carefully, flaying him alive with one choice phrase after another. By the end, he was weeping, loud gulping honks that grated over the speakers.

Serve him right, she thought.

Lamey had her worried more than Sergei or Jacob Biswas. Every day she half-expected Lamey to bust down the door and demand that she produce Earthgirl. He never turned up.

On her final day on Spannan, Biswas insisted on meeting her, with other members of his family, at the skyhook. She cut her hair severely short, wore Cheng Ho undress uniform, and virtually plated her face with cosmetics. If she looked to Biswas like a different girl, no wonder.

He was kind and warm and asked no questions. He told her she looked very grown up, and he was proud of her. She thanked him for his kindness and for looking after her. She hugged him and the daughters he'd brought with him.

His wife, Sergei's sister, had the sense to stay away.

Later, as the skyhook carried her to Spannan's ring and its steady acceleration pressed her into her seat, she realized it was Caro's Earthday, the real one.

The anniversary that Caro would never see. ○

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Reading Headlines While Waiting in the Check-out Line

The *Enquirer* says "Space Aliens Prefer CNN."
This is poor journalism.
First of all,
where would aliens come from,
except for outer space?
Better perhaps to eliminate
the word "space"
and either make a more general
or a specific statement:
"Aliens Prefer CNN"
or "Venusians Prefer CNN"
to make a clear distinction.

But we still have not solved
another fundamental problem.
Context is required
to provide the bigger picture.
A source, for example, might help:
"Survey says: Venusians Prefer CNN"

which poses other questions,
questions that I as an Earthling
and a cable subscriber
need answered:
What competing channel does E.T. spurn?
What cable system has the contract on Venus?
And if the cable guy,
slated to arrive between nine and noon,
can't get to my house on time,
how does he travel the distance to Venus
6.2 minutes at light speed
to make repairs in a timely manner?

Enquiring minds
want to know.

—Janna Silverstein

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

CHINDI
by Jack McDevitt
Ace, $22.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-441-00938-7

McDevitt's latest novel begins with one of the classic SF premises: discovery of a signal from an unknown extraterrestrial race, followed by the search for those who have sent it. McDevitt postulates a set of beacons orbiting a neutron star, transmitting in an unknown language. The Contact Society, a group of wealthy amateurs who seek evidence of non-human intelligence, fund a starship to go look for the source of the transmissions. And Priscilla "Hutch" Hutchkins, protagonist of several of McDevitt's earlier novels, is the Society's choice to pilot the ship.

Hutch, who has spent two decades piloting cargoes from Earth to various far-flung outposts, is close to burnout; her last two assignments ended with her employers leaving her to find her own way out of the near-disasters they'd sent her into. But another pilot on whom she has a blazing crush talks her into it, and she finds herself actually becoming interested in the various members of the expedition—although when one of them turns out to be a former lover, she realizes she may be getting into a much more complicated job than she'd planned on. The relationships of the various passengers are just the start of the complications—though they are prickly enough to make Hutch nostalgic for some of her more routine trips, where fraternization between pilots and the paying customers is strongly discouraged.

At first, tracking down the signal looks like a wild goose chase. The beacons around the neutron star are just the first in a series, each of which relays the still-undeciphered message to another system—more often than not, one sufficiently distant to make getting there expensive and time-consuming. Even the Contact Society begins to wonder how long it can afford to finance the chase, especially since some of the discoveries along the way are in themselves interesting enough to almost justify ending the journey and studying them. But having taken up a trail, the members of the society find they cannot abandon it until they reach its end—or the end of their ability to follow it. The quest has become a goal in itself, despite a growing casualty list. Hutch, as the hired hand, has little choice but to go where her employers want her to take them. And off they go, only to find still another puzzle at their next stop....

Chindi most readily brings to mind Arthur C. Clarke's classic novel *Rendezvous With Rama,* where the explorers find one marvel after another, keeping the reader's sense of wonder constantly engaged. So with this book, as the ship continues its journey, McDevitt keeps raising the stakes—and topping each surprise with another even more interesting. Where

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McDevitt goes Clarke one better, though, is by actually delivering a riveting plot along with his catalogue of wonders. The climactic chapters of *Chindi* have a narrative drive worthy of the best space opera, as the explorers uncover a final marvel that strains both their technical resources and their will to survive. At the same time, McDevitt's science is hard enough to satisfy the most demanding fan of nuts and bolts SF.

In short, *Chindi* is gracefully written, well-plotted, and packed full of quintessentially SF ideas. Highly recommended.

THE WITCH QUEEN
by Jan Siegel
Del Rey, $24.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-43903-1

Third in the series that began with Siegel's well-received *Prospero's Children* and continued with *The Dragon Charmer,* this continues the story of Fern Capel's struggle to contain a series of ancient evils attempting to seep into the life of modern England. Several years have passed since the events of the second volume; Fern is now in her thirties, working for an advertising agency in London, when a new threat arises.

Dana Walgrim, profligate daughter of a nouveau-riche investment banker, has apparently fallen into a drug-induced coma at a wild New Year's Eve party. Following the incident, the banker rents the ancient country house Wrokeby in which the party took place to Morgus, a strange woman who had briefly confronted Dana. It is clear almost from the start that Morgus has uncanny magical powers, and that she is in some way responsible for Dana's trance-like state.

At almost the same time Fern and her friend Gaynor (who's staying with Fern while recovering from the latest of a string of disasters in her love life) receive a visit from a goblin, a burglar sent by Queen Mabb to steal a magical spear in Fern's possession. Fern smoothly counteracts the supernatural burglar, gives it a drink of champagne, and then sends the Queen a gift of friendship—a cheap makeup kit. But afterward, Fern finds herself caught in a by-now familiar nightmare, in which she finds herself at the top of an enormous tower, ready to sign a pact with her ancient enemy, the demon-god Azmordis. She awakes in fear, and spends the rest of the night trying to avoid sleep.

That may be a sufficient sample to suggest the characteristic tone of Siegel's fantasy: smartly contemporary, full of resonances, and in almost equal parts whackily funny and disturbingly dark. The cast of characters is as diverse as this description suggests: supernatural beings who bear a distinct resemblance to down-at-the-heels gentry; deracinated urbanites who willfully serve the forces of darkness; and ancient wizards, stoned adepts, and allegorical beings with all-too-real powers over the living. The settings are for the most part British, from trendy London nightclubs to rundown north-country manses, but with sudden random glimpses of an uncanny world beyond the boundaries of day-to-day life in any country.

Out of these elements—in themselves meatier than the premises of much current fantasy—Siegel creates a suspenseful story of likable characters caught in an ancient battle between good and evil.

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While readers can probably enjoy this one without having read the first two books of the trilogy, I'd strongly recommend making an effort to find them; a good bit of the fascination of the series is watching Fern and her brother come into possession of their powers, and then growing into quirky adults who see the modern world with eyes opened to dimensions invisible to most of those around them.

The Witch Queen brings that growth to a convincing and satisfying climax. On the evidence of this trilogy, Siegel must certainly be added to any reader's list of important new fantasy writers.

STORIES OF YOUR LIFE AND OTHERS
by Ted Chiang
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-765-30418-X

Ted Chiang's high ratio of awards to published stories is ample evidence that he is among the writers anyone interested in current SF ought to be reading. This book, collecting all his stories to date, takes away any remaining excuses for not doing so.

Chiang's stories most frequently begin by assuming the literal truth of some fantastic premise, then squeezing every possible consequence out of it. His first published story, "Tower of Babylon," takes the reader to an environment straight out of myth, yet Chiang imagines the scenario as if it were the hardest of SF. The logistics of constructing the enormous tower, of climbing to its top, and of supplying the workmen, are meticulously worked out. At the end, the characters achieve a kind of breakthrough—but hardly the one either they or the reader expect.

Again in "Understand," Chiang takes the central premise of a classic SF story and pushes it a step further. The subject is a drastic increase in human intelligence, seen through the eyes of the person undergoing the transformation. But unlike "Flowers for Algernon," this story examines the agendas that a superhuman intelligence arising in our midst would be likely to form for itself, rejecting the sentimental assumption that a truly superior person would have the best interests of our species at heart. The gut-level impact of Chiang's working out of the implications of his premise is impossible to ignore.

"Story of Your Life" is told by one of the linguists recruited by the military to help translate the language of an alien race that has come to Earth for reasons no one understands. Alternating with that narrative are scenes from the life of the linguist's daughter, apparently chosen at random. What gradually becomes clear is that the process of understanding the alien language has opened up unexpected abilities in the human woman who tells the story. Again, an almost archetypal theme—but handled with an emotional edge that very few writers could bring off as cleanly as Chiang.

Other stories take an equally radical approach to their material. "Seventy-Two Letters" takes the story of the golem, and its notion of cabalistic names, literally and examines it through the SF lens of rationality. "The Evolution of Human Science" is a short-short about the end of human science as supercomputers take over research and publication. And "Liking What You See: A Documentary" postulates a medical procedure that makes its

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users immune to the physical attractiveness and unattractiveness of other people, and then looks at the impact on interpersonal relations among college students.

"Hell is the Absence of God," the most recent story in the book, is in a sense fantasy—it postulates a world with actual angels manifesting in everyday life, miraculous cures, and a literal hell. The consequences of the divine interventions in everyday life are chaotic; the human victims of the devastating manifestations of divine will spend much of their lives trying to discover explanations for their fates, or to preach the inscrutable glory of god to whoever will listen. Chiang plays this one very close to the vest, with a conclusion that is likely to outrage some readers. A virtuoso piece, powerful and disturbing.

In fact, those last two adjectives could be applied to almost all of Chiang's work. His unsettling vision is both highly rational and wrenchingly emotional, with a placid surface of finely tuned technique that does nothing to disguise the harsh materials with which he deals. If Ellison and Sturgeon are among your favorite SF writers and you haven't yet discovered Ted Chiang, this collection is your perfect chance to do so.

THE GRYPHON'S SKULL
by H.N. Turteltaub
Forge (Tor), $25.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-87222-4

This is the second in a historical series, set in the era when Alexander's generals were carving up his empire, by the transparently pseudonymous Mr. Turteltaub. The first volume, *Over the Wine-Dark Sea,* introduced Sostratos and Menedemos, two cousins (the one a would-be philosopher, the other a down-to-earth womanizer) who run *Aphrodite,* a trading ship out of Rhodes. Here, they come across an exceptionally odd bit of merchandise: the skull of a gryphon, or so the Kaunian merchant from whom they buy it represents it.

Here, Turteltaub has borrowed a paleontologist's speculation that the gryphon, one of the few mythological beasts to which there is no particular story attached, is simply an attempt by the ancients to make sense of a *Protoceratops* fossil. (The fossils are comparatively commonplace in the Gobi Desert, not all that far from the eastern frontiers of Alexander's empire.) And, of course, Sostratos' reaction to the skull is that he must bring it to Athens for the philosophers in the Academy to examine.

But first, the two merchant sailors have other jobs to accomplish. Their cargo includes not just the fascinating (but quite possibly valueless) skull, and the usual run of fine wines and perfumes, but some emeralds—a decidedly hot commodity, in several senses of the word. The gems are known to come only from Egypt, and trade in them is officially a monopoly of the Egyptian monarch Ptolemaios (Ptolemy in modern spelling), one of the most ruthless of Alexander's successors. And by whatever combination of bad luck and bad timing, Sostratos and Menedemos have begun their expedition just as Ptolemaios has brought his huge warfleet to the Aegean to challenge his rival Antigonos. Almost before they know it, Sostratos and Menedemos are caught up in the intrigues of the two rival generals.

Turteltaub keeps the plot rolling by introducing a seemingly endless

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string of threats and challenges to the cousins' various missions, which run the gamut from more or less innocent trading to smuggling, espionage, and fighting off pirates. At the same time, they are doing their best to remind the various armed bands around them that Rhodes is after all a neutral city, and to run reluctant errands for the ruler of Egypt without his becoming aware that they are trafficking in contraband from his own country. The result is an eventful journey, full of twists and turns and near-disasters.

The fantastic aspect of the story is confined almost entirely to the fossil skull, but there's plenty of action, humor, and historical color to make up for the absence of that element. Those who've enjoyed Turteltaub's work under his own name are almost certain to find plenty to tickle their fancy here.

THE MAGICAL WORLDS OF THE LORD OF THE RINGS: The Amazing Myths, Legends, and Facts Behind the Masterpiece
by David Colbert
Berkley, $13.00 (tp)
ISBN 0-425-18771-3

Tolkien is among the most scholarly of all modern fantasy writers, and the depth of allusion in his work has attracted scholars from the very beginning. Even before the 1966 paperback publication of the "Rings" trilogy in the US, professors of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English were likely to proselytize for the books during class time. Here, the author of *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter* turns his hand to an exploration of the vast body of raw material on which Tolkien drew for his masterpiece.

I suppose a book of this sort will engender knee-jerk put-downs from readers with a literary background who see it as "dumbing down" the substantial body of Tolkien scholarship, as well as from those who wonder why somebody has to spoil a good read by piling mountains of extraneous material on top of it. The first group should take into account that, as the subtitle suggests, Colbert's intended audience is younger readers, many of whom are encountering Norse and Celtic myth for the first time here. Even those already familiar with the material may not have thought to make the (often subtle) connection between it and Tolkien's work. As for reading the trilogy and stopping right there, as the second group may wish to do, there is nothing inherently wrong with that. But a glance at this book might change their minds about the relevance of the scholarship—a matter on which Tolkien himself would have had little doubt.

The material is presented in the form of questions, with a brief essay (two to five pages) on each. The sources cited run the gamut from Tolkien's own experiences (a childhood spider bite that may have inspired him to create Shelob) to his linguistic virtuosity (sources for many of the names in the trilogy) to the enormous body of literary influences behind Middle Earth, from *Beowulf* and the Finnish *Kalevala* to Shakespeare and the Bible. Running next to the more extended discussion, sidenotes give tidbits about "Lord of the Rings," such as the length of time it took to write the trilogy, or the Beatles' plan (never followed up) to film the trilogy with themselves in key roles. And the bibliography and footnotes give a

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quick (if uncritical) list of additional materials, both in print and online.

There are occasional errors, such as the statement that the Gandalf award is given annually as part of the Hugo ceremony. I spotted nothing really egregious enough to undercut the book's usefulness for its intended audience, though anyone doing serious Tolkien scholarship will want to go to original sources. Speaking of sources, it might be nice if more of the quotes from Middle and Old English literature were given in the original language, along with the translation, to let readers see how closely Tolkien often echoed his sources. And the illustrations are uneven—although, at their best, quite evocative. But on the whole, Colbert has done a fine job of opening the door to the greater world behind Tolkien's trilogy. Any reader who wants a quick introduction to the sources, analogs, and influences on the trilogy is likely to find this little book a very satisfactory starting point. ○

Chat online
with your favorite authors!

Meet Our Nebula Nominees **April 8 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Check our website for our Nebula Award Finalists! They will participate in this chat just days before the award ceremony.

Jacqueline Carey **April 22 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
chats about her latest book—*Kushiel's Avatar*.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Here come the big Easter cons: UK, Oz and NZ Nationals; MiniCon and NorwesCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

APRIL 2003

4–6—WillyCon. For info, write: **c/o Ron Vick, Wayne State College, 1111 Main, Wayne NE 68787.** Or phone: **(402) 375-7321** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.wildcat.edu/clubs/sfclub/text_sites/willycon. (E-mail) rovick1@wsc. edu.** Con to be held in: Wayne NE (if city omitted, same as in address) on WSC campus. Guests will include: W. McCarthy, J. & B. Jamison.

4–6—OddyseyCon. www.venture-1.com/~oddcon. Radisson, Madison WI. H. Turtledove, C. Asaro, J. Kovalic, J. Vinge.

4–6—SakuraCon. (253) 503-2233, ext. 1675. www.sakuracon.org. Airport Hilton, Seattle WA. Anime.

11–13—EerieCon. www.eeriecon.org. Days Inn, Niagara Falls NY. J. McDevitt, L. Flewelling, the Penneys, H. Clement.

11–13—Trek Celebration. (913) 441-9405. www.sfedora.com. Kansas City MO. Commercial Star Trek event.

17–20—World Horror Con, Box 2000, Lee's Summit MO 64081. (913) 248-9808. Kansas City MO. Masterton, N. Smith.

17–21—Australia Nat'l. Con, GPO Box G429, Perth 6841, Australia. www.swancon.com. Kings Hotel. L. Flewelling.

18–20—MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. www.mnstf.org. Millennium Hotel. R. Sawyer, C. Clink, S. Mason.

18–20—NorwesCon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 270-7850. SeaTac Doubletree. Yolen, Burns, Landis, Whelan.

18–20—Fantasm, 67 Gail Dr., Athens GA 30606. (706) 369-1561. Sheraton Colony Sq., Atlanta GA. Adult relaxacon.

18–20—Anime Boston, Box 587, Marlborough MA 01752. www.animeboston.com. Park Plaza, Boston MA. T. Grant.

18–21—CostumeCon, Box 633, Skokie IL 60077. www.enteract.com/~ccg. Doubletree. Masqueraders' big annual con.

18–21—NZ Nat'l. Con, Box 74-013, Market Rd., Auckland, NZ. (649) 846-3766. Ibis Hotel. Bujold, Duane, Morwood.

18–21—UK Nat'l. Con, 8 The Orchard, Tonwell SG12 0HR, UK. www.seacon03.org.uk. Hinckley UK. Chris Baker.

19–21—Destiny, 163 Park Rd., Loughborough LE11 2HE, UK. www.vortex-events.freeserve.co.uk. Colin Baker.

25–27—Jersey Devil Con, Box 403, Metuchen NJ 08840. www.jerseydevilcon.com. New Jersey. H. Harrison, B. Skir.

25–27—Corflu, c/o T. Benton, 108 Grand Canyon Dr., Madison WI 53705. corflu20@tds.net. For fanzine fans.

25–27—ConFurence, Box 84721, San Diego CA 92138. (619) 303-9380. Hilton, Burbank CA. Anthropomorphic furries.

25–27—Camp Dover Peace Conference, 105 Charles Dr., Dover NH 44622. Days Inn, New Philadelphia OH. Trek.

25–27—ComiCon, 1002 Graham Av., Windber PA 15963. (814) 467-4116. Expomart, Monroeville (Pgh.) PA. N. Gaiman.

25–27—StarFest, Box 24955, Denver CO 80224. (303) 777-6800. Marriott Tech Center. Commercial Star Trek event.

26—Cosplay, c/o RECCA Soc., 2700 E. Leland Rd., Pittsburg CA 94565. www.reccacon.com. Anime costuming con.

MAY 2003

2–4—DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322. (515) 830-1305. Hotel Fort Des Moines. O. Butler, Lubov, R. Hevelin.

2–4—PenguiCon, Box 131225, Ann Arbor MI 48113. www.penguicon.sourceforge.net. Warren MI. Terry Pratchett.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca. Freas. WorldCon. C$250+/US$170+.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org. Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $140+.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk. Glasgow Scotland. US$115/£75.

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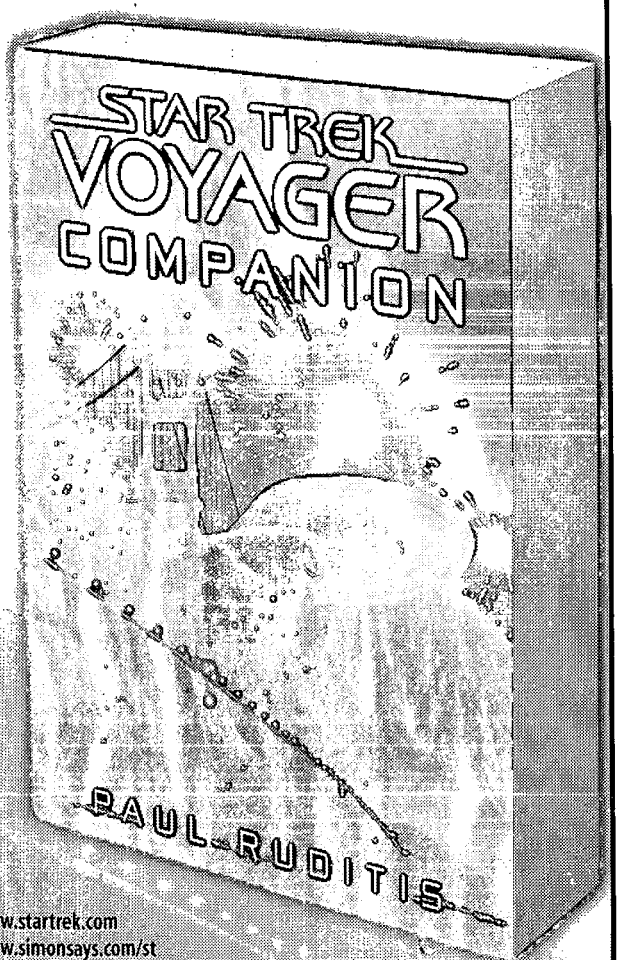

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